

OEAP presentation for June 03-04, 2020

Covid19 impact to fishers economy:

At the beginning of the pandemic the fishers were not too concerned about the virus and kept fishing and selling without any mitigation efforts. However, this only lasted for about a week. When the Governor of the USVI implemented a state of emergency and stay at home order, the fishers realized that sales would drop, so many fishers reinvented themselves by contacting their costumers and had them come to the fishers' house or the fisher would go to the costumer's house.

When the government of the USVI implemented guidelines to mitigate for Covid19, non-essential employees were allowed to work remotely from their homes and essential employees were given reduced hours. The Governor included fishermen as essential employees because they were providing food for the residents. The fishers again reinvented themselves and, at their selling sites, by the road side or market they would have in place 2 buckets of water and liquid soap so that they or their customers could wash their hands after every transaction.

The greatest impact to the fishers came when restaurants had to close, this reduced sales to a selected few fishers that sell fish product to restaurants. However, some restaurants were allowed to have "to go" dinning and sales started to pick up a little except for the lobster fishery which was an important food product for restaurants that catered to tourism.

During the stay at home order, sale of fish was through the roof according to many fishers I interviewed at their selling sites. They stated that people had to stay home and cook more often so sales were very good. Also the off island workers that lived at the Limetree refinery housing, which ranged in numbers of around 1200 workers and who could not go to restaurants, started buying fish in large amounts to include not only reef fish and shell fish but also whole pelagics. One pelagic fisher according to a DAP (District Advisory Panel) member, stated

that he could not keep up with the demand for pelagics such as whole mahi, tuna, and kingfish.

Approximately 6-7 weeks into the pandemic and after CDC guidelines were announced the government started relaxing the stay at home order and implemented mandatory wear of face mask for all residents, all the fishers including those who scale fish for customers were following guidelines and wearing face mask while making transactions and the customers also would approach the fishers at the selling sites on the roadside and markets wearing face mask. These measures allowed the consumer to feel safe and the fishers recovered quickly economically.

The highest economic impact by Covid19 was to the charter for hire fishing industry because tourism suddenly stopped. Those companies incurred 100% losses and have not recovered to date. This might change in the next few weeks since the Governor recently announced that the USVI has effectively eliminated the community spread of Covid19 through actions taken by the government of the USVI and the residents so they plan to enter the blue phase, meaning hotels will be able to book leisure guest, however, cruise ships are not expected to return to the region before August.

The fishers of St. Croix have proven themselves to be very resilient and they should be commended for their ability to quickly reinvent themselves. Life is not what it used to be and we won't know whether we will get back to normal or live a new normal.

Thank you

Any questions ?