

Daily Press

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A 140-year Bay tradition: Climb aboard the Cockrells Creek for a trip in search of a small, oily fish that's at the center of a big political battle.



CHASING MENHADEN

STORY BY DAVE RESS, PHOTOS BY JONATHAN GRUENKE



Top: Fishermen aboard purse boats from the Omega Proteins boat Cockrells Creek begin to raise a seine net full of menhaden Sept. 3. **Above, left:** The 185-foot Cockrells Creek and other boats from the Omega Proteins fleet circle schools of fish. **Above, right:** Menhaden jump as a net is raised from the Chesapeake Bay. Omega Proteins' plant in Reedville processes the fish, which are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, for meal and nutritional supplements. The company is at the center of a battle over how many of the fish to harvest from the Bay.

ABOARD THE COCKRELLS CREEK — The second set went fast, the 150,000 menhaden in the net not as “heavy” — that is, as frisky swimmers — as the fish in the Cockrells Creek’s first haul, farther down along the York Spit Channel a half hour earlier.

As the boat’s giant vacuum hose gathered in the last flopping menhaden, the spotter plane pilot circling overhead said they should drop everything and move off to port where another 150,000 fish were schooling. So the men on the Cockrells Creek’s two 40-foot “purse boats” hastened away — still tied together with ropes and a giant 1,500-foot-long purse seine, half on one boat, half on the other.

It didn’t go as fast the rest of the day in Virginia’s 140-year old menhaden fishery, these days shrunken to one company with eight vessels operating out of a tiny port in one of the most rural corners of the state.

It’s an industry that once made the village of Reedville one of the most prosperous in the state — big, brightly-painted three-story Victorian mansions, bedecked with gingerbread woodwork under their generous shade trees line Main Street in testimony to those long gone days.

These days, menhaden are at the center of an obscure, if fiercely fought, political battle over who should catch them where, and whether the Omega Proteins fleet that still sails from Reedville is harvesting too many from the Bay. Among the reasons for that concern: Menhaden are an important food source for striped bass.

“We’re the last people who want to be overfishing them. We want there to be

THEY RODE OUT DORIAN — ON ABACO IN THE BAHAMAS

Couple regrets not evacuating home on island in crosshairs

By **MIKE HOLTZCLAW**
Staff writer

“We are fortunate,” Brian Lockwood says. In fact, he and his wife, Cindy, say it a lot these days.

They say it enough that you believe them despite the 6-inch scar that’s been on his forehead for two weeks and doesn’t look like it’s going away anytime soon.

Yes, they are fortunate, even though their home is gone and even though they had to endure several days cut off from the rest of the world, their communication reduced to an occasional message informing family and friends that “we are OK” with the longitude and latitude of the point of transmission.

They are fortunate because they survived a direct hit — literally — from Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas and can now talk about it in the past

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INSIDE

A CHAIN LIKE NO OTHER

A group of Poquoson scouts, with help from family and friends, worked together to shatter the world record for the longest chain of carabiners. **News, Page 3**

TEENS SHOT AFTER FOOTBALL GAME

Three teenagers were hospitalized after being shot outside Todd Stadium in Newport News following a Friday night football game. **News, Page 5**

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JONATHAN GRUENKE/STAFF PHOTOS

Carroll Diggs, one of the 15 fishermen on the 185-foot long Cockrells Creek, pulls a seine net full of menhaden aboard a purse boat Sept. 3. The boat is part of the Omega Proteins fleet.

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lots of fish," said Alan Hinson, captain of Omega's newest boat, the 185-foot long Cockrells Creek, trying not to be too disappointed that the day's final set — a school he'd spotted off the Mathews County shore — totaled just 60,000 menhaden, plus the ray one of his crew had carefully tipped out of the net as the last several hundred fish were sucked into the hold.

Of quotas and fishermen

Those 60,000 fish weighed about 9.5 metric tons, given the average six-ounce weight of an eight- to nine-inch, 2-year-old fish, like those caught that day.

In 2013, when the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission cut its coastwide cap on the menhaden catch by 20%, Omega cut two boats from its fleet, which meant 45 fishermen lost their jobs.

At the same time, the commission cut its separate limit on the Bay catch by purse-seining vessels like Cockrells Creek by 20%, to 87,000 metric tons a year. Purse seiners are called that because they encircle schools of fish with long seine nets which are rigged to be drawn shut and tightened, like an old-fashioned money purse, to trap their prey.

"We've adjusted," Hinson said. "We can live with that."

But in 2017, when the commission decided the stock of menhaden was healthy enough to allow for an 8% increase in the coastwide quota — the third straight year the limit increased — it went the other way with its cap on the Bay catch by purse-seiners. That it slashed by 41.5%, to 51,000 tons.

Omega lobbied hard, and successfully, to convince the Virginia General Assembly not to adopt the commission's new Bay cap, meaning the state operates under the old 87,000-ton limit.

Earlier this month, with weeks to go before the end of the season, federal fisheries officials told Omega it had exceeded the new 51,000 Bay cap by 400 tons.

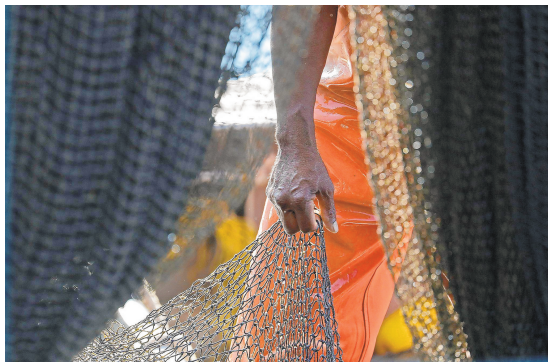
"We had no intention going into the season to exceed it, and never imagined we would as we've been doing so much fishing just outside the Bay the past few years, but this year those fish didn't show out there but instead showed just inside the line designating it being caught in the Bay," said Monty Deihl, Omega's vice president for ocean fleet services.

Deihl said there's no way Omega's Bay catch would exceed the older cap.

"If a company is going to be fishing, it needs to comply with state and regional rules and regulations ... not only have they not done that, they don't anticipate doing that," since Omega isn't saying it will not stop fishing in the Bay, said Chris Moore, a senior scientist with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

So far, the commission has not pushed the matter, by recommending the U.S. Department of Commerce impose sanctions on Virginia that could include a moratorium on commercial fisheries — a recommendation likely to find little support in the Trump administration, commission members have said.

The commission said its aim with the lower Bay cap is to make sure the menhaden harvested to be processed into fish oil and fishmeal at Omega's plant don't all come from the Chesapeake



Lionel Waddy pulls a seine net in during a Chesapeake Bay trip in search of menhaden schools.



Engineer Julio Silva moves a giant vacuum hose used to gather menhaden from a seine net.



Menhaden, a small but commercially valuable fish, flap in the air while lodged in a seine net.

Bay. The total catch for fish oil and fishmeal in recent years, including what Omega's boats catch in the ocean from New Jersey to North Carolina, has averaged under 140,000 metric tons.

More to the point, the latest Bay quota cut was intended as a precautionary measure, as scientists work for a better understanding of the Bay's menhaden stock and how it fits into the entire Chesapeake ecosystem, Moore said.

It was pegged at the average of

the past five years, "plus a fudge factor," Moore said. So far Omega hasn't caught more, so it seems like a precaution that doesn't hurt the company, he said.

But the commission increased its cap on menhaden caught in Maryland waters and the Potomac River, where Omega's boats are not allowed to fish, by 60%, its 2017 management plan amendment shows. Instead of being processed, the menhaden caught there are used as bait to catch edible fish and crabs. The

cap on Omega's Bay catch is eight times as large as the limits on the Maryland and Potomac River harvest.

Watching the fish

To spot menhaden from a boat, even with binoculars from the pilot house of the Cockrells Creek, the equivalent of four stories up above the waves, isn't easy.

A purplish patch among the waves could be fish or simply a current or quirk of wind. The whipping of waves from the

flipping of diving fish's tail, the circling gulls or pelicans — though there are far more of the latter these days than back when the fishery started — can all be clues.

But you can plow along miles of the lower Bay without spotting any, unless your luck is good, as it was for Hinson, spotting the Cockrells Creek's last set of the day.

Which is why Omega's boats work hand in glove with spotter-pilots. After a Sunday flight by the spotters found the best spot on their New Jersey to North Carolina patrol was likely to lie between Cape Charles and Mobjack Bay, the Cockrells Creek got underway from Reedville at 2 a.m. Monday, in order to be in place at dawn, when the planes could take off again.

"It's like fishing from the air," said Omega vice president Deihl, while watching the boats prepare for the overnight voyage from Reedville to the mouth of the Bay.

The sky above the black silhouette of the Eastern Shore was just reddening with the dawn when mate Tim Crandall let the Cockrells Creek drift slowly just outside an anchorage dotted with a half dozen coal ships, waiting to load at Newport News and Lamberts Point.

The spotter planes arrived shortly after 6 a.m., and the Cockrells Creek would circle, impatiently, for nearly two hours before one sent word of a big, nearby school.

Another boat, which had made a slightly earlier start, was down closer to the Thimble Shoals light where, as things would turn out, the heavier schools, fresher from the ocean, would be that day. It's not just that those fish move around more, making them harder to handle in the net; they can be bigger and, at least on this day, gather in larger schools.

The Omega boats couldn't go too much farther out — they can't fish too near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel and have what Hinson calls a "gentleman's agreement" not to fish near the Lynnhaven River or closer than three miles off the Virginia Beach Oceanfront. And while the boats will range as far as New Jersey and North Carolina, Hinson's hunch was the fish this year were more inclined to spend time in the Bay than in past years.

"You have to go where the fish are," he said.

The Bay cap

That's why the new Bay cap of 51,000 tons worries Omega.

Even though its catch in the Bay doesn't always reach that point, when autumn's nor-easters and hurricanes brush by, its boats can't safely go out off the Carolina shore to chase the bigger, oilier late season fish that congregate there.

The fish don't like the bad weather either — the plant runs 24 hours a day during the fishing season when we have fish, having fish is very weather dependent," Deihl said.

"Fish show in different areas at different times depending on many factors — weather, winds, tides, sunshine, atmospheric pressure, etc. — and since we need to be able to see what we are after, we will normally travel, within reason, to where the fish are showing, fully realizing that we are normally passing tens of millions of fish which are too far below the surface for us to effectively see and catch at that moment," he added.

Menhaden stocks are growing,

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JONATHAN GRUENKE/STAFF

Purse boats circle a school of menhaden as the sun begins to rise Sept. 3. Omega Proteins is at the center of a battle over how many of the fish should be harvested in the Bay.

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particularly to the north, where a new fishery is developing chasing the fish for use as bait for lobsters and other seafood, but Moore said there are troubling signs about the Bay population.

While the commission has not found any overfishing of menhaden, with its data showing the catch has been sustainable since the early 2000s, Moore is concerned that there's limited information on the size of the stock in the Bay, the nursery for about a third of all Atlantic menhaden.

He's also concerned that the number of young fish has been flat, rather than growing. The commission's data shows this number ranging from around 12 billion to 18 billion a year since 1990. That's down from the more variable numbers of the 1980s, which were as high as around 30 billion.

But besides his questions about population trends in the Bay, Moore also worries that Omega's lobbying against the new Bay cap — which included

convincing the Virginia General Assembly not to amend state law to incorporate the cut — puts the whole interstate system of managing fisheries at risk, even for such hard-pressed species as striped bass.

"When the biggest actor says it's not going to accept the rule, that's a bad signal, he said.

Time and money

"If you can step it up, we've got some really good stuff popping up to the west," Crandall radioed to the purse boats as they closed up and began tightening the net around the first school of the day. He had just heard that the spotter found a second, big school of menhaden a few hundred yards away.

But that first school was even better than the spotter had estimated — there'd be 300,000 in all. And because they were heavy — swimming hard to try to escape — they were difficult to handle.

When Crandall eased the Cockrells Creek next to the purse boats juggling the several tons of fish in the net between them — a feat of seamanship that Omega won't allow its boats to try when

there's more than three- to four-foot seas — he knew they'd have to take a pass on the second school the spotter reported.

Crandall ended up using the boat's "hardening rig" — the large crane amidships — to make three separate grabs at the net, as if it was securing three big handfuls of the mesh in order to keep the fish tightly corralled for the vacuum hose to take up. For the rest of the day's much smaller sets, the purse boats' much smaller power winches were enough to handle that task.

"Time is money, time is money," Crandall muttered, as the slow unloading continued and the spotter directed another Omega boat to the second school that Crandall hoped to hurry after.

The chase

But 40 minutes later, the spotters found another school for the Cockrells Creek: Hinson pulled the lever that sounded the bell to tell the purse boats' crews — five each, including Hinson himself on the starboard boat — to get into their heavy waders, sea boots and hard hats and climb up to the stern ramp where the purse boats were secured.

It took just a minute or two to motor out to the school. On the way out, the two boats move as one, secured by lines bow and stern as well as by the giant net, filling the rear half of each boat.

From the Cockrells Creek, Crandall watched carefully, glancing back and forth to the darker spot the school made in the water and the sun.

"I want to get in position — if they're going to break out, I want to get between them and the sun. They'll head to the sun," he said.

"But I'm going to want to end up on the other side," he continued, pointing to the open end of the "V" the two purse boats were making, as they started hauling the net in. The opening of that V would need to be tight against the Cockrells Creek when it was time to start transferring the fish.

His careful jockeying of the boat and the lighter load in the net made for a faster transfer of the second set — and allowed the purse boats to chase quickly after another school when they got the word from the spotter.

Teamwork

It takes a lot of teamwork to chase menhaden.

The five men in each purse boat have set positions: one at the bow, handling lines; Hinson at the controls in one boat, bosun Lionel Waddy in the other; one man at the power winch; and two at the stern, handling lines and carefully stowing the net as the winch man guides it through the winch's big rubber wheels.

When the Cockrells Creek approaches purse boats and their full net, hand signals and gestures coordinate Larry Lander's precise toss of lines to the purse boats as well as, a bit later, Crandall's control of the big hardening rig with the purse boats and Hinson's and Waddy's directions to one another and to their purse boat crews.

Hinson's sharp downward thrust of his arm, for instance, alerted Irvin Ball, at the stern in Hinson's purse boat, to the thrashing of a big red drum fish in the third set; reaching down, Ball was able to roll the fish out so it could swim away.

Radio calls from the half-dozen spotter planes, circling more than 500 feet above, keep the team on track.

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After the purse boats transferred the second set to the Cockrells Creek, it was the spotter's radio call — "Let it go, let it go," that told the purse boats it was time to start circling the third school of the day.

Then, the spotter's call: "You're off a little bit" to the bosun, to let him know he hadn't quite reached the edge of the school and needed to ease off to starboard some, before the boats and neatly encircled the fish.

Sometimes, it doesn't work as well — as when the spotter found a fourth school in hand by the second set of buoys in the York Spit channel.

But as the purse boats approached, came the bad news.

"They're really not moving all that much," the spotter radioed.

The fish were too close to the buoy to go after — even if the purse boats could keep the net clear, there was too big a risk the buoy would tear up the net.

Hits and misses

The fifth school, on the other hand, moved too fast.

"They're not breaking. They're not breaking," Crandall muttered, watching through his binoculars as the purse boats tightened the net.

"Maybe they're late breakers ... they're not breaking. There's not going to be any fish."

There weren't — just several hundred, barely worth putting the suction hose down.

A day that had started strong was turning sour.

"Tell me which way to go," Hinson grumbled into the radio after clambering back up to the pilot house.

But the spotters had nothing good to tell him.

Hinson didn't really want to turn south, back toward Thinkle light, since that would put him behind another, faster boat — that would mean a choice of coming in late back to Reedville, and maybe not unloading his fish until the next morning, putting him back among the schools too late in the day for good fishing, or else staying out overnight.

Overnight would mean the fish would begin to soften, despite the Cockrells Creek's refrigerated holds.

Since the crew's pay depends in large part on the volume of fish they land — and since softer fish



Capt. Alan Hinson of the Cockrells Creek checks his cellphone and monitors before sunrise while navigating the boat to begin a day of fishing.

can get chewed up at dockside during unloading, and get squished down more than firmer, fresher fish in the tanks where they're measured — there's a cost to delay in returning to Reedville.

"Sometimes, playing the plant is more important than playing the fish," Hinson said.

But fish and birds feed on them — when the purse boats encircle a school, they'll draw flocks of gulls and pelicans.

Recreational fisherman say menhaden are a favorite prey of striped bass.

A Virginia Institute of Marine Science study shows menhaden account for about 8% of what strippers eat. Other studies, though, suggest that menhaden account for about a third of what large striped bass eat, while computer modeling by a team of fisheries scientists from the University of Maryland's Chesapeake Biological Laboratory and Humboldt State University in 2017 estimated the population of striped bass is nearly 30% below where it would be if there were no commercial menhaden fishery.

Watching one of the men on the power boat cast again, Hinson cut the Cockrells Creek's engines.

"What are you doing here on a work day?" he joked. "Maybe they'll move on."

But another small power boat sped towards them, eyeing what its captain obviously thought was

a fish hotspot.

"We won't disturb them," Hinson said, watching the second boat settle in the water off his port beam.

"They were here first."

Sharp eyes

Hinson cut the engine to let the Cockrells Creek drift for a bit, hoping the two power boats would move on, but after several minutes, reluctantly, gave up and started heading back to Reedville.

After three decades chasing menhaden, he can read the water, and spotted a darker patch with the tell-tale small splashes of menhaden fins breaking the surface. He radioed a spotter, to see if the pilot saw the school that he was sure he was seeing.

It wasn't the biggest school, but it was tight-packed, and right there. He rang the bell, stepped back into his boots and waders, and headed to the purse boats, poised on the Cockrells Creek's stern ramp.

The 60,000 fish the purse boats unloaded a half hour later would put the Cockrells Creek's take that day at just over 800,000 men-

haden.

"A little above average," Hinson said.

With the Lancaster shore off to port, Hinson — a native of that Northern Neck county — says he remembers his grandfather's pond nets there — the stakes that held those nets are long gone.

Hinson's father fished for two decades with the menhaden fleet, while his great-grandfather was also a pound net fisherman in Lancaster.

An avid recreational fisherman himself — Hinson just came in fourth in a mackerel tournament — he knows that menhaden are an important source of food for other species. But he's pretty sure there are more than enough to go around for the striped bass and other game fish that themselves generate a multimillion-dollar Virginia business and for Reedville's big menhaden boats.

"I think there's more fish now than when I was a boy," he said, making the final turn into the channel for Reedville.

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