

[Why some fishermen are bottoming out](#)

- Emily Wilson, Special to The Chronicle
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Ever since he can remember, Don Dodson wanted to be a fisherman.

"It's something I wanted to do since I was a little kid," he said. "You know how kids are -- you play with trucks or whatever. Well, I was making boats out of boxes."

In 1960, Dodson bought his first boat and began fishing for sand dabs, petrale sole and other groundfish out of Santa Cruz. Forty-three years later, fishermen like Dodson are facing tighter restrictions on how many pounds of fish they can haul in, limiting their incomes and making some consider getting out of fishing permanently.

Now might be an especially good time for them to do it. The National Marine Fisheries Service has launched a program aimed at buying about half of the 263 fishing trawlers on the West Coast to reduce overfishing and make it easier for those remaining in the industry to earn a living.

Dodson is one of 107 people who met an Aug. 29 deadline to bid on selling their boats and fishing permits as part of the program. The bids will be ranked by taking the amount the owner is asking and dividing it by how much the fisherman makes. The lowest scores will be at the top of the list in an effort to get the highest producers off the water.

In October, licensed commercial fishermen will vote on whether to authorize the buyback. If the vote succeeds, those whose bids were accepted will surrender their permits, and their boats will be permanently taken out of commercial fishing.

Groundfish, also known as bottom fish because they live near the bottom of a body of water, have long lives and low reproductive rates, which make them easy to overharvest. Pete Leipzig, the executive director of the Fishermen's Marketing Association, based in Eureka and a major force behind the buyback, said government officials didn't know this when they encouraged the buildup of the West Coast fishing fleet in the 1970s and '80s to compete with foreign fleets.

By the late '80s, scientists were concerned about shrinking stocks of fish, and in the last several years, regulations on fishing have become stricter. Most bottom fishing was banned on the continental shelf from Canada to Mexico last fall to protect the threatened

rockfish.

The restrictions mean that fishermen are struggling to stay afloat financially, and Leipzig hopes the buyback program will provide enough economic incentive for them to get out of the business, and help the ones who stay make a living with less competition.

"The root of the problem is there are just too many boats fishing for groundfish now," he said. "As a result, the amount of fish people have available to them through trip limits is not enough."

Officials at the national service are putting up \$46 million to buy the licenses, and those who stay in groundfishing will pay up to 5 percent of their annual earnings until \$36 million of that is paid back.

Leipzig is proud of the program.

"The motive to embark on this came from the industry in order to make the management of the resource better," he said. "This is better than what the government would have provided if we sat and waited for the government to solve our problems."

While it was people in the fishing industry who pushed for the buyback, Ernie Koepf, a deputy harbormaster at Pillar Point Harbor in Half Moon Bay --

who has been fishing for salmon, crab, and herring for 30 years -- doesn't know many people who plan to take advantage of it.

"Jobs aren't that easy to come by," he said. "If you're making a fairly decent wage annually, for you to take a cash settlement isn't smart business, and then you're stuck with the boat. The buyback will appeal to the guys who are sick and tired of the change in regulations and the anti-fishing pressures. "

Rowdy Pennisi, who keeps his boat, the Relentless, at Pillar Point Harbor,

has no intention of getting out of commercial fishing. Pennisi has been fishing since he was 15 and has no desire to do anything else.

"I don't want to sell my boat," he said. "I'm a fishermen -- for my whole life, this is what I've done, and I want to at least get another 25 years of fishing out of my boat."

Mike Grable, who is in charge of the program for the national service, says that it is inevitable that not all fishermen will love the buyback, but something needs to be done.

"The buyback involves a really radical decision for fishermen," he said. "Basically, what you're talking about is exiting something that they've made a living with for most of their life, but this fishery is really in such economic duress at the moment that this is very much needed."

Rod Fujita, a senior scientist with Environmental Defense in Oakland, said the buyback is a good compromise, for now, but what he really wants to see is a change in the way fishermen are allowed to catch fish.

"The buyback is a Band-Aid, not an end-all solution," he said. "I don't think that rapacious fishermen or stupid management or even poor science are the cause of the problem. The underlying cause is economics. In an open access system, there's no control on the amount of fish that an individual can catch and that creates incentives to compete."

But for Dodson and others, the buyback provides a way to help fishermen -- even if giving up their life's work is not easy.

"It's like an Indian giving up his Indian rights," Dodson said. "But financially, I don't know any other way to get out . . . it's gonna help the ones that are right up against the wall as far as finances go. If a guy has a real problem making payments and the buyout's a way out for them, great. If we can help the fishermen, I'm all for it. "

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