

OCRACOKE ISLAND

Watermen's group is battling to keep last fish house afloat

BY CATHERINE KOZAK
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

OCRACOKE ISLAND — With their first successful summer behind them, operators of the Ocracoke Seafood Co. have set their sights on drumming up support to keep the island's sole remaining fish house open in the future.

"Right now," said Robin Payne, organizer of the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association, the group is "really heavy into teaching awareness of what we do."

The group's first fish fry fundraiser will be at 3 p.m. Saturday at the fish house, with the watermen themselves cooking up their catch. The event coincides with the Art Walk event in the village that features artists promoting their craft at their studios or galleries.

All the fish fry proceeds will go toward the watermen's association, which must raise \$447,000 by June 1 to secure ownership of the fish house. That figure includes costs for a new truck and some renovations and upgrades. Payne said that the group's 501-C status is expected to be approved within 60 days.

Last winter, the fish house escaped what island watermen feared was its demise when the owner agreed to a proposal to let the group take a year to pay off the property. Without the fish house, commercial watermen had to go



IF YOU GO

What Fish fry fundraiser.

When 3-6 p.m. Saturday.

Where Ocracoke Seafood Co., overlooking Silver Lake in Ocracoke Village.

Donation \$8 per plate. All proceeds go to Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association, a nonprofit group created to support the fishing heritage of the island.

much farther to off-load their catch and had no local market to sell their fresh-caught fish.

A number of island watermen got so discouraged, they sold their gear and their boats and got out of the business altogether.

Payne said that an operating fish house is central to a

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COURTESY OF ROBIN PAYNE

A group is trying to raise \$447,000 to secure ownership of the Ocracoke Seafood Co. The costs include a new truck, renovations and upgrades.

Fish: Waterfront's loss is concern for island

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WANT TO HELP?

functioning working waterfront. The loss of waterfront has become a critical issue in North Carolina, which has appointed a study committee to address the problem. Ocracoke waterman Hardy Plyer, a member of the Working Watermen's Association, is a member of the panel.

Since reopening June 1, the 28 part- and full-time watermen, all members of the association, have become self-sufficient, Payne said.

"They're making a living," she said. "They pay the bills from whatever profit they're making. We've got trucks that go off-island four times a week. They deliver to the wholesaler."

Joey Daniels, owner of Wanchese Fish Co., has loaned a truck to the fish house to help out and "because he likes Ocracoke flounder," Payne said.

The retail market at the front of the fish house also has been thriving.

"It has done a great summer season," Payne said. "We did not anticipate that it would do that well."

Donations can be sent to the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association, a nonprofit group created to support the fishing heritage of the island, c/o the Ocracoke Foundation, P.O. Box 1165, Ocracoke, NC 27960.

The group is reaching out to schoolchildren through the youth center to teach them about fishing as a livelihood. The North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching is holding a seminar in mid-October at Ocracoke on fishing and working waterfronts on the island.

As the water starts to cool, Payne said, the watermen are gearing up for the wholesale season, when each boat can haul in as much as 2,000 pounds a day of flounder, roe mullets, speckled trout, red drum, black drum, bluefish or Spanish mackerel.

"They're going to be bringing in boatloads of fish," she said. "You're knee-deep in fish."

■ Reach Catherine Kozak at (252) 441-1711 or cate.kozak@pilotonline.com.