

Fishers oppose new regulations

New amendments to Belize's Fisheries Regulations have the country's fisherfolk up in arms. But according to the Fisheries Department, the updated regs are more than ten years overdue.

by Khaila Gentle

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As Lobster Season, which is scheduled to open on July 1, approaches, several fishing communities and a large number of fisherfolk are expressing their ire at the new regulations introduced by the Fisheries Department to govern the minimum size of lobsters that can be legally harvested. Many of those fishers are claiming that the amended Fisheries Regulations, which took effect on March 1 of this year, will severely affect their livelihood.

The amendments now prohibit the capture of lobsters with a tail weight of less than 4.5 ounces (rather than the previous 4 ounces) and require that whole lobsters be at least 3.25 inches, rather than the previously required 3 inches, in length—something which one group of fishers says will reduce their catch by 25% compared to last year, since lobsters larger than the newly required size are rarely found. Furthermore, changes have been made to the number of lobster traps allowed for each fisher, and an increase in the required escape gap size of lobster traps is reportedly also in the works.

In response to the growing complaints, which have come from fishers in all corners of the country, the Fisheries Department held a press briefing this week. Acting Administrator of the Department, Rigoberto Quintana was there to answer questions. He told local media that the department has been

having discussions with various entities about the amendments since June of last year. Many fishers, however, have claimed that the department never consulted with them prior to implementation of the new rules.

Quintana also noted that the changes in the Fisheries Regulations are long overdue. In 2009, Belize signed a binding agreement with the Organization of Fisheries and Agriculture in Central America (OPESCA) to update its Fisheries Regulations, which it then failed to comply with for almost a decade. In 2019, OPESCA wrote to the Government of Belize, inquiring about the lack of compliance.

“Belize requested an extension to 2019 to implement some of these measures in place. We have had these ongoing discussions, especially at the levels of cooperatives and some of the fishers. June last year, we had these discussions again with the main exporters, which is Northern National to say, you know what, let us move forward with this and let us do it for the next fishing season. That is why we passed that law last year, and the regulations come into force the first of March,” he stated.

According to Quintana, the only issue left to be discussed with the Fisheries Council is the required size of the lobster trap escape gaps. The other regulations are already in effect.

In response to the fishers' claims that they had not been consulted, Quintana said that the department has had several

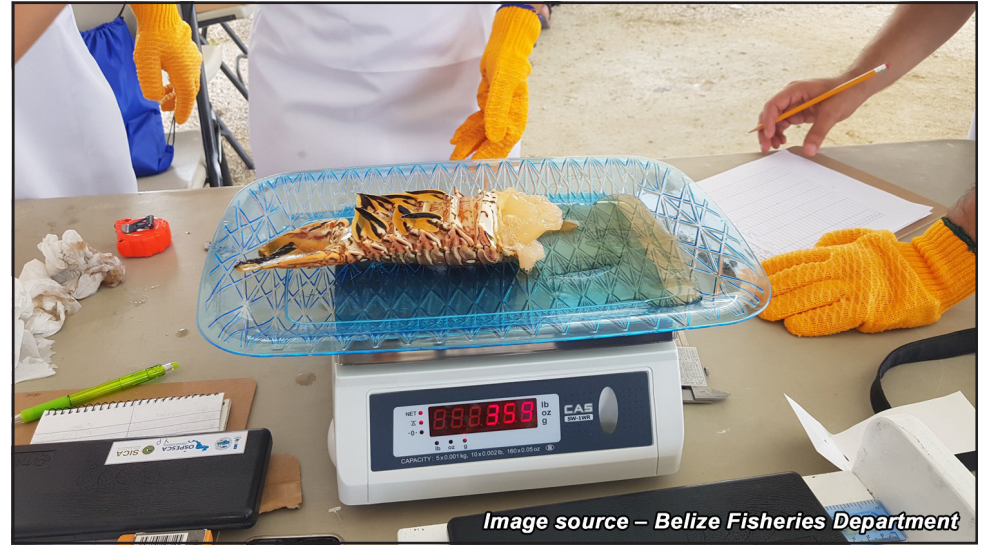


Image source – Belize Fisheries Department

discussions with entities that provide representation for fisherfolk, with the most recent meeting regarding the new legislation having taken place in October of last year.

“Maybe some fishers are not aware, but we have the highest decision body in this country, which is the Fisheries Council, and there we have four representation of our fishers. We have the Chunox Fishermen Association. We have the Hopkins Fisherman Association. We also have the two largest cooperatives, which they form part of the council and they participate in these decisions. Whether this information is not being channelled to the other fishermen is something that we have to discuss further, but they are informed of all the measures the department is taking, and they are being consulted,” he said.

The new regulations come at a time when fishers, like the majority of the Belizean population, have been seeing their livelihood threatened by rising fuel prices and the overall increased cost of living. And while the amendments will certainly have an immediate effect on the fisherfolk, Quintana noted that it is what's

best for Belize's fisheries in the long run.

“We cannot use the excuse of high fuel prices and not be a responsible institution to manage the fisheries, whether prices go for one dollar or twenty dollars, our mandate at Fisheries Department is to manage the lobster resources in this country,” he stated.

Quintana also noted that as a result of an increase in the minimum size of lobsters that can be legally caught, lobsters will be allowed a better chance at reproducing before being harvested, which will ultimately increase the number of lobsters in the wild.

“Yes, the cooperatives have indicated that probably initially they might see a 15% decline in production, but eventually that production will stabilize,” he further said.

In regard to the fishers' method of voicing their qualms—which so far has included a petition—Quintana stated that they should approach the Ministry and the Fisheries Department formally. One group, a community of fishers from Caye Caulker, has stated that they are currently seeking an audience with the Minister of Blue Economy, Hon. Andre Perez.

FECTAB “ballistic” over propose Southern Cruise expansion

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ship passengers and revenue from the Belize City cruise tourism hub, to Norwegian Cruise Line's Harvest Caye destination, owned by Belize Island Holdings Limited, a subsidiary of the mega cruise company, located in southern Belize.

In a Cabinet release issued on April 28, the government mentioned the proposed development.

“Approval was granted by Cabinet for the Ministry of Tourism and Diaspora Relations to initiate a formal process of review of the current definitive agreement between the government and Belize Island Holdings Limited to improve and facilitate the future growth and development of cruise tourism in Southern Belize,” the Cabinet release stated.

While Almendarez said that the government may try to forward this agenda at tomorrow's sitting of the House of Representatives, there is no indication that there is a motion to introduce any expansion or further development of the Harvest Caye facility at this time.

Almendarez, for his part, cried foul on the part of area representatives on the Southside of Belize City who he suggests are supporting this government

decision. He added that persons with ties to big business interests from Southern Belize may be behind this recent push for further cruise tourism development down south. The Harvest Caye facility is located just off the coast of Placencia.

“As far as I know, Placencia has never been a cruise-ship-destined port. I am very good friend with the people from Placencia, and they are upset that this one is there now; now because of some well-connected Southern businessmen who are very well-connected, I could hala names and unu wa know, they have the master plan... It's a well-designed plan to keep the money inna wa central location, but the saddest part about that, when you do that, the money gets charged by credit card, and when you get charged by credit card, that nuh coh yah, ih nuh benefit we yah, nobody yah. That nuh stay, that goh soh,” Almendarez said.

Almendarez believes that the expansion of southern cruise tourism would result in a decline of the industry in other areas and is calling on the Government of Belize to backtrack from any such possible move. “If the ship they goh down south...everybody goh pan one island; everything control by credit card by that island, everything got a big operator. You know bout H20

Tierra, you know bout Chuckka, you know bout Dark Night, den deh da the bigger people. They wah win! You hear who wah win, they wah win, cause they have the contracted tours with the tour company. We all know they cruise ship wah keep all they money inna they pocket. We at FECTAB, we are not suppose to be here, the private tour operator, we nuh suppose to deh inna the business, we suppose to fall inna line and goh work fi Chuckka and goh work fi Dark Night and they companies; that da weh they wa we do, and I do tell unu open unu eyes. They do sell we out,” Almendarez said.

The Belize Invest website states, “The Eco/Adventure Cruise Port will allow cruise line passengers to experience Belize at its finest on the island that has all the imaginable amenities to pamper the discerning tourist.”

While FECTAB has blasted the possibility of cruise port expansion in southern Belize, one particular cruise project in the Belize District, Stake Bank's development at Port Coral, has the full approval of the federation, which has at various points publicly defended that mega cruise port development, despite in some instances pushback in some quarters based on environmental concerns. It has been reported that the federation and Stake Bank Enterprise

Limited have entered a 25-year arrangement through which members of the federation would be granted opportunities to work at and alongside the Port Coral cruise facility.

“We at FECTAB are proud to tell the nation of Belize, those years ago, not long ago, in fact, we managed, under the last administration, to get a twenty-five years bonafide, guaranteed, contract with Port Coral—access, complete, unfettered access. It was given, I know about it, and so does the president. It was given in great glee; the Feinstein group was happy to do it. And when we showed it to our membership of tour guides, operators, taxi drivers, etc. everybody was quite happy, and thinking only of we are waiting for this thing to happen,” Tom Greenwood, president emeritus of FECTAB stated in an October 2021 interview.

Of note, Act 1 of 2016, the Belize Island Holdings Facility Development Act 2016 ratifies the September 2014 agreement between the Government of Belize and Belize Island Holdings Ltd., and grants cruise port exclusivity to the company in Southern Belize. Section 7 of that legislation states, “During the term of the Agreement, the port facility shall be the exclusive cruise ship port for the Stann Creek and Toledo Districts.”