Support Cameron Fishermen

A collection of news stories published 2022-23
Cameron Fishermen in the News

We at the Louisiana Bucket Brigade have been working with Southwest Louisiana fishermen to let people know what's going on with your threatened industry. This booklet highlights some of the stories you have shared.

- More than 90 news stories about impacts of gas export terminals on SWLA have been published in 2022-23.

Quote Highlights:

- “The fishermen will fight before they take everything we have. We will fight,” said Travis Dardar.
- “Gas exports have destroyed us this year, not just shrimping, but crabbing, fishing, and oysters,” Cameron Parish fisherman Anthony “Tad” Thierot told Truthout. “If something is not done, it will bankrupt us by next year.”
- A natural gas tanker docked at Venture Global’s Calcasieu Pass looms large as Philip “Rooster” Dyson Jr.'s small lobster boat in the Calcasieu Ship Channel. Dyson said the narrow waterway in western Louisiana isn't big enough for both of them.
- Nathan Berwick comes from a long line of crabbers dating back to the 1820s, when his ancestors first arrived in the hof the Louisiana boot – the state's southwest corner. “Thirty years from now I want my children to be able to say, ‘this is my home, this is where eight generations of Berwicks have lived,” he said.
- Holly Beach resident John Allaire also doesn’t understand what he sees as a blind rush for economic gain. The companies building LNG terminals in Cameron Parish are assuming that international demand for the fuel will be robust for decades to come, he said. “They’re selling it abroad to the highest bidder, with full knowledge of what it’s doing to the planet.”

For links to these stories and more, go to DefendSWLA.org, and follow our “Fishermen of Cameron” Facebook page.

Special thanks to the fishermen who have sacrificed their time to give interviews and host interested parties in their homes and on their boats. Special thanks to dedicated fisherman Travis Dardar and his wife Nicole. Follow and join his organization FISH (Fishermen Involved in Sustaining our Heritage) on Facebook and Instagram.
A natural gas tanker docked at Venture Global’s Calcasieu Pass looms large as Philip “Rooster” Dyson Jr.’s small lobster boat in the Calcasieu Ship Channel.

Dyson said the narrow waterway in western Louisiana isn’t big enough for both of them. His boat is diverted about three times a week by larger vessels—disruption that can last several hours and cost him as much as $5,000 a night in lost revenue.

The few large ships coming in and out of the channel are just the beginning. Houston-based Commonwealth LNG is planning to develop a facility along the channel and Virginia-based Venture Global is already planning to expand its operations at the mouth of the channel in Cameron Parish, La.

The storms are hurting the fishing industry, but advocates say gas export facilities could be dealt a fatal blow.

Liquefied natural gas facilities that super-cool the gas turn it into a liquid and load it into massive ships for delivery to Europe, Asia and elsewhere, which are proliferating along the Gulf Coast. The roughly 55-mile stretch of coast connecting Texas and Louisiana has three operating LNG facilities and seven more in various stages of planning and development, with much of that coming from development. Houston-based companies.

The specter of more disruption is fast looming for the Gulf Coast fishing industry as booming LNG trade floods an area already devastated by the storm. Cameron Parish, La. The latest major hurricane to make landfall was Hurricane Laura in 2020. It roared ashore with an 18-foot storm surge and 150 mph winds that tore buildings off their foundations, killing 47 people and causing $19 billion in damage. It was the most powerful hurricane to hit Louisiana since 1856.

Three years later, the signs of its damage are still visible—bent metal shards, the cement remnants of buildings swept away by the storm. Mattresses hung from the second floor of a dilapidated building.
The danger you know

Dyson, 40, has spent the bulk of his life on shrimp boats, he said, wringing his hands as he danced between the knees of the boat’s wooden steering wheel. Storm has always been a part of the equation.

He said people sometimes ask him why he won’t move from an area that has been unlucky with storms in recent years. His answer was that where can one go and feel safe nowadays? “When you see a storm coming, at least you have an idea of where you’ve got to go and what you’ve got to do,” he said. “You’ve got a tornado dropped, you don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Hurricanes and gas exports aren’t the only challenges it faces. Warmer waters are making for more sharks, whose growing population is making it more difficult for shrimp. The rising cost of diesel fuel has also eaten into profits.

Some nights are better than others. The night before, Dyson said that the fishing was barely enough to cover the cost of manning the boat for the night. He caught $422 in shrimp and spent $285 to fill his tank with diesel. A good night — anywhere between $1,000 and $5,000 in revenue — can help offset the bad ones.

He said he understands why so many fishermen in Cameron decide to work at Venture Global’s LNG facility instead of trying to make a living at fishing. “Everyone from Cameron who works there was a fisherman.” But what is right for them is not right for them, he said. “That’s what I love to do,” he said. “I’m trying to do it as long as I can.”
According to the Louisiana Bucket Brigade — an environmental and social justice group — the oil and gas industry plans to build 12 additional gas export terminals, “each of which could reach the size of a football stadium and consume vast amounts of land, including coastal wetlands and other sensitive areas.” The installation of Calcasieu Pass LNG has already had environmental effects, Dysen said. “So much wildlife was back here, that’s all gone,” he said.

As a prominent shrimper, Dysen said he has seen the consequences of comparable facilities in other areas, such as Sabine. After a gas export terminal was established there, the number of active shrimping boats was reduced from 50 to none. A similar situation occurred in Freeport, Texas, he said. He said he believes this is strategic. “All over the place, these big corporations, first thing they do is they get all the docks … it’s big corporations wanting to build condominiums on the waterfront and run the local fishermen out. So, this is a nationwide problem.”

Anne Rolfe, executive director of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, has also been a witness to the community effects of LNG gas export terminals. She has worked in St. James Parish and said the two largest Black-majority districts is where industry development was focused. “They closed the high school, they got rid of the post office, they shut down an evacuation route,” she explained. She said she believes the trends are repeating themselves at Calcasieu Pass. “Here, it is very clear that what they are doing is industrializing the lower Cameron Parish, and you can see the very same trends of withdrawing government services.” She referenced the unreliable Cameron ferry, in addition to the loss of the library, Cameron Jetty Pier and the original Davis Road boat launch. This former boat launch was located in an area absorbed by Calcasieu Pass LNG. Dysen said there was also a building with bathrooms and a pavilion built with public money and a pier that was taken away. A public dock was provided by Venture Global, but Cameron resident Travis Dardar — an indigenous Louisiana fisherman and oysterman — said the provided launch is only a fraction of what used to exist. “We could launch three boats at the same time over there.” He said the new dock can hardly handle one boat. “Most commercial boats are as wide as this launch,” he said. “To take something that great, and give us back something so little, just to say that they’ve done something is proof that it wasn’t for you.” Dardar is originally from Isle de Jean Charles, the historical homeland and burial ground of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choc-taw indigenous peoples that has been reduced to a strip of land due to erosion. Dardar, along with his wife Nicole, moved to Cameron for higher ground and commercial fishing opportunities. “When I moved here it was beautiful. It reminded me of what the island where I’m from

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used to be.” He recalled a body
of water filled with shrimp.
“By 8:30, 9 in the morning we
were already at the bank wait-
ing to cash our check, our day
was made, that early in the
morning. Slowly and surely
it went away. First they took
the dredge away, then they
took the docks away. Then
the shrimping, the price went
down, everything declined,”
Dardar said. Phillip “Roost-
er” Dyson, a Cameron-based
fisherman and shrimper,
said he believes the Camer-
on shrimping industry has
a life expectancy of no more
than two years. “If something
doesn’t change … I mean, it’s
all about the plants and noth-
ing about the shrimping in-
dustry.” He said the presence
of Calcasieu Pass LNG in the
water limits the ability to fish.
“When the shrimp show up,
they’re moving those ships
and you can’t be anywhere in
the way. They want us to be
two miles from these ships
when they come into the
ship channel. Well, I’d have to
leave my dock to be two miles
away from them.” “If you’re
shrimping and one of those
boats is coming through, it
doesn’t matte. Pick up your
nets and move,” said Nicole
Dardar of the large tank-
ers used to transport LNG.
While not a shrimper herself,
she said she has felt the effects
from the sidelines. Her family
(they have two children) live
less than a mile away from
Calcasieu Pass. She believes
the largest consequences is
the decline of their well-be-
ing, both mental and phys-
ical. “Our health is just not
what it used to be.” She said
she recently suffered a heart
attack and now has to wear a
heart monitor. She is 43. “It
destroyed our lives,” said Tra-
vis. “The kids are miserable
… they hate it here.” They
attribute this to the general
decline in their quality of life,
citing simple joys that are no
longer present. “We used to
be able to hear the beach, the
waves crashing on the beach
at night. Now, all you hear is a
roar … no one should have to
live next to this,” said Nicole.
Adley claims to have experi-
enced negative effects to his
health, as well. He worked at
the plant for about a year and
a half with a third-party as a
mechanic for diesel engines
before being let go six months
ago. He developed COPD
and has undergone two heart
operations. “Before that I had
never been sick in my life.”
According to Nicole Dardar,
the proposed expansion
would be built only hundreds
of feet away from their house.
Much like their neighbors, they
have been offered buyouts from
Venture Global. Negotiations
are ongoing, and they were not
comfortable with disclosing
previous offers. “It’s not enough
for us to move,” she said. Ad-
ley has firsthand experience
with moving out of Cameron;
he was displaced after the land-
fall of Hurricane Laura. “ They
need to keep in mind that these
people are having to start over,
and that’s not cheap.” Rolfes
said it’s important to remember
the damages from natural eco-
logical events like hurricanes,
erosion and world-wide climate
change have contributed to the
region’s decline; however, she
believes further industrial ex-
pansion will be the nail in the
coffin. “Cameron Parish is so
important, it is a lifeblood, and
it’s the LNG facilities that are
the last straw. If those things
get built, it’s over here,” she said.
“What could happen if all that
energy, and the money, were re-
directed in support of the fish-
ing industry?” Adley said in the
end, the loss of a culture would
be the greatest thing to mourn.
“The house is nothing. It’s the
family and your town and your
kids’ friends and how do you
put a price on that, ya know?”

Travis Dardar said a boat launch constructed by Venture Global in Cameron Parish to replace a previ-
one can hardly handle one boat at time. (Emily Burleigh / American Press)
On the inviting teal-colored water in the shipping channels off the coast of southern Louisiana, Phillip “Rooster” Dyson pilots his bright red shrimp boat named Papa’s Shadow through a landscape he no longer recognizes.

His practiced gaze sweeps over the water, but very little remains of the small fishing community of Cameron, where he has lived all his 40 years. The rickety wooden social clubs, bars, homes, and colorful shrimping boats are gone, most of it replaced by giant liquid natural gas terminals, and many more are planned for Louisiana’s fragile coast.

The shrimp are also more challenging to find these days. “It costs $400 just to take the boat out,” he said in his strong Southern southern accent, adding that July can often be a slow month for shrimp. “But this is the slowest it’s ever been. I’m not sure if I can buy the things my kids need for school right off the bat [and] pay utilities.”

Not more than a decade ago, when Dyson bought his first boat, he could make $5800 a day trawling for shrimp in the channels close to his home but also far out in the rich vastness of the Gulf of Mexico.

One of his most recent catches in mid-July brought in a measly $200, to be shared between himself and the two men that work on his boat. Dyson has eight kids, while his employees also have families.

But the relentless search for shrimp isn’t just a simple standoff between Dyson and the water. It’s yet another warning sign of a creeping cultural and environmental shift with implications far outside the small town boundaries of Cameron and beyond the chipped red paint and rusted deck of Papa’s Shadow.

As American dependence on vast amounts of imported seafood remains steady, local fisheries desperately wane along America’s southern coast and in other places where fishing nets are cast. If those disappear, there will be a loss of experienced voices in the fight against climate change and the unraveling of the vibrant Creole and Cajun cultures – a centuries-old way of life intricately woven on land and water. These vibrant
coastal communities, especially in Louisiana, are in danger of morphing into ghostly reminders of a purposefully disregarded heritage, replaced by giant buildings whose only job is to send fossil fuels thousands of miles away in return for big profits.

And while those risks and rewards are weighed by the community leaders and high-ranking politicians, Dyson is searching for brown shrimp this month so he can pay his men and keep doing the only job he knows how to do.

“I really don’t have no education, so I have to make this work best I can,” he said.

Hurricanes and the Mississippi River

Threats to the U.S. shrimping industry have grown over decades, eating away at livelihoods and gutting small towns that, for many people, remain the lifeblood of every coast in the country.

Climate change has ravaged parts of those coasts, with hurricanes dramatically reshaping the Gulf Coast landscape and reducing the abundance of shrimp and other marine life. But hurricanes, expected to become more frequent and powerful in the coming decades because of warmer oceans, are one of the catalysts that can send a small town into a spiral and prevent them from bouncing back.

And without a thriving fishing industry to help, many small towns can slowly decay. Cameron was already on the outs before it got a direct hit from Hurricane Laura in late Aug. 2020. Hurricane Katrina's destructive force began the exodus in 2005.

In other parts of coastal Louisiana, like Dulac and Houma, two areas south of New Orleans, hurricanes have hobbled the once-famous fishing fleets, and not everyone can bounce back. Dulac's population, for example, has almost halved since 2019, according to census records. Hurricane Laura and Ida hit in back-to-back years, making a fishing resurgence more difficult.

The same can be said for the dozens of communities that survive on stilts all the way from New Orleans deep into parts of south Louisiana where indigenous, Creole, Cajun, and other groups still live.

Bigger boats are better equipped to survive because they can go far out to the Gulf to get away from storms or make a bigger catch, whereas the smaller vessels may be damaged or destroyed, meaning the shrimping season is over for that boat.

But even the bigger boats face difficulties out in the Gulf.

Dead zones, or red tides, as some fishermen call them, are areas with very little oxygen in the water. That means no sea life can survive there. The zones can grow to as big as 7,700 square miles and typically start where the Mississippi River empties into the Gulf of Mexico, about 100 miles south of New Orleans. The lack of oxygen is caused by fertilizer runoff collected from farms the entire length of the Mississippi's 2,350-mile route as it winds through some of the country's most fertile and essential farming land.

As one industry thrives, another dies.

That means fishermen must go further out to catch shrimp, yellowfin tuna, cobia, or red snapper. Those areas cost more to get to, and there are no guarantees of success.

Alongside environmental changes, importing overseas shrimp and other seafood has hugely undercut the U.S. fishing industry. At the same time, the arrival of oil and gas terminals all over the Gulf of Mexico has also made the job of fisherman much harder.
‘Death stars on sinking land’: How liquified natural gas took over the Gulf Coast

The U.S. is now the world’s top exporter of LNG. Towns in southern Louisiana are paying the price — through pollution, noise, and destruction of this area’s longtime way of life.

When John Allaire bought his 300-acre property along the Gulf of Mexico in the 1990s, the southwest coast of Louisiana was a very different place. There were no industrial plants in sight, just wide expanses of wild grasses and wetlands leading to belts of oak trees, known as cheniers, that lined the sandy shore near the Texas state line.

Since then, coastal erosion has wiped away almost all those old-growth forests, and much of the landscape has been cleared for the construction of new LNG terminals like the one Venture Global built near the border of his property.

Allaire lives in Cameron Parish, a once-sleepy area dotted with fishing hamlets that has transformed over the last decade into one of the world’s most important hubs for exporting natural gas. Three terminals currently operate in the 5,000-person parish; another seven are on the way. If Cameron Parish is where gas companies go to set up shop, carving out pipeline networks and erecting massive liquefaction terminals, then the city of Lake Charles an hour to the north is where they broker business deals.

Long a favorite site of chemical companies, refineries and their accompanying pollution, Lake Charles is trying to capitalize off the prime coastal real estate to its south. For the past two years, local politicians have lured gas executives from Germany to Japan with events like the so-called “Americas LNG & Gas Summit & Exhibition,” held at the Golden Nugget Hotel and Casino, a sprawling complex that overlooks the Calcasieu River, which, appropriately enough, contains high levels of heavy metals, including dioxins and mercury, leaked from nearby plants.

Local officials have celebrated the announcement of every new LNG development in the area, calling the industry a boon for economic growth and employment.

Some residents, like Allaire, have a different perspective. As soon as the Venture Global terminal known as Calcasieu Pass began operating near his home in early 2022, Allaire witnessed a string of problems.

“Right away you had black smoke, alarms going off at the plant, and flares going constantly,” he said.

Liquefying gas is a dirty process. Terminals like Calcasieu Pass operate nearly around the clock, sucking in gas from a national network of pipelines and liquefying it so it can be loaded onto ships. When there’s too much gas backed up in the pipes, or when other refrigerant chemicals start to build up, the company prevents explosions by burning off gas, which sends orange flames shooting into the sky from the company’s flare towers.

Allaire, a former oil and gas engineer, knows that a certain level of flaring is to be expected when workers attempt to control pressure variations within their equipment.

But too much flaring can be a sign of larger problems, he said. Flaring releases a cocktail of pollutants like carbon monoxide, black carbon, and volatile organic compounds like benzene and formaldehyde. These chemicals are especially dangerous for vulnerable people like pregnant women, whose odds of having a premature birth can double from regular exposure to pollution from flares.

A report by the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, an environmental non-profit, found that the facility violated the Clean Air Act by exceeding the pollution thresholds specified in its permit more than 2,000 times last year. Grist confirmed that assertion by reviewing the facility’s own records. This flaring led to the release of numerous chemicals, including between 19,000 and 37,000 pounds of nitrogen dioxide, a greenhouse gas that has been linked to chronic lung disease.

The turbines at Calcasieu Pass near Allaire’s house have a generation capacity of 720 megawatts, enough to power more than 500,000 homes at once. The Environmental Protection Agency considers gas turbines major sources of toxic air pollution, since the combustion process releases a slew of cancer-causing chemicals such as benzene and formaldehyde.

That pollution can travel dozens of miles away, diminishing air quality in more densely populated inland areas like Lake Charles. What’s more, LDEQ enforcement records indicate that the machines at Calcasieu Pass are prone to malfunctions, sometimes for long stretches of time. Last year, three gas turbines at Calcasieu Pass failed repeatedly over two straight months, emitting thousands of pounds of pollutants into the air.

Emissions from LNG terminals across Louisiana and Texas are putting an outsize burden on lower-income neighborhoods. In Cameron Parish where Allaire lives, the median income is $64,000, but more than 14 percent of people are below the federal poverty line, $30,000 for a family of four. The incomes are much lower near the plant itself: a federal analysis of the Venture Global plant in Plaquemines found that two-thirds of residents in a census block near the terminal live below the poverty line.

Another company, Houston-based Commonwealth LNG, is about to break ground on an export terminal and pipeline network just over his property line. In 2021, representatives from Commonwealth offered to buy Allaire’s land and he turned them down.

He refuses to leave, no matter the offer, he said.

Though Allaire spent 40 years working in the oil and gas industry, living near an LNG terminal for the past year and a half has changed his mind about a few things.

When he worked at an oil refinery in the 1980s and 1990s, he wasn’t aware that burning all that fuel would cause carbon to build up in the atmosphere, but now that the science of climate change has advanced and become mainstream, he feels certain about the industry’s impact on the climate.

That impact is now compounded by natural gas, he said, through drilling — which causes significant leaks of methane, a potent greenhouse gas — and through burning, which releases carbon dioxide, even though it’s a less carbon-intensive fuel than oil.

Allaire also doesn’t understand what he sees as a blind rush for economic gain. The companies building LNG terminals in Cameron Parish are assuming that in-
ternational demand for the fuel will be robust for decades to come, he said. “They’re selling it abroad to the highest bidder” with full knowledge of what it’s doing to the planet.”

Of the five liquefied natural gas terminals in operation on the Gulf Coast, at least four have suffered some kind of leak or blast, whether due to extreme weather or a mechanical malfunction. Those incidents demonstrate what happens when supercooled gas escapes from pipelines and storage tanks.

In early 2018, liquefied gas escaped through a crack in one of the storage tanks at a facility in Cameron Parish owned by Cheniere Energy, the Houston-based corporation that was the first American firm to export LNG. Workers discovered and patched the leak before any explosion occurred, but an investigation by the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, part of the federal Department of Transportation, revealed other cracks in the tank. The regulator fined Cheniere $2.2 million and ordered the company to stop using two faulty tanks, deeming them “hazardous to life, property, or the environment.”

Leaks and malfunctions like these can also trigger explosions. In June 2022, a thunderous blast shook Freeport, Texas, a town of 10,000, from Freeport LNG. Workers discovered the leak on the facility the day after the explosion. They were working on the facility’s pressure valves caused gas to build up in a pipeline and leak out into the air, where it formed a dense “vapor cloud” and ignited.

Though such a blast hasn’t happened on the Gulf Coast yet, experts worry that the liquefaction process could lead to much bigger blasts.

The Freeport explosion involved a leak of methane, but export terminals also use flammable refrigerants including ethylene, propane and hexane to condense gas into a liquid. They are all even more explosive than gas itself, which means they could create larger vapor cloud explosions, perhaps large enough to level entire city blocks.

“We have searched high and low to find this answer of how far people would be affected and no one has been able to tell us,” said Naomi Yoder, a staff scientist at the Gulf Coast-based environmental organization Healthy Gulf, who studies LNG terminals. “If they don’t have those answers, then what in the world are we doing building these things?”

Jobs provided by gas exporters are sought-after in cash-strapped parishes like Cameron, which sometimes fail to provide residents with basic services.

Some locals are worried that, even if the new terminals create more jobs, community conditions won’t improve.

On a bright day in April, Travis Dardar stood with his boot heels in the shallows of Calcasieu Lake, a few miles away from John Allaire’s house, surveying the area where he took his boat out to catch shrimp each spring. Dardar, 38, has been fishing his entire life, beginning in his hometown of Isle de Jean Charles, an island community in southeast Louisiana.

Dardar is a member of the United Houma Nation, a state-recognized tribe, and his family had a strong connection to the island.

In 2015, he and his wife and kids moved west to Cameron, where he could still make a living by shrimping, the only occupation he’d ever known. Dardar quickly got used to life in Cameron, a fishing community just like Isle de Jean Charles. But then came the LNG terminals, one after the other, tearing out patches of wetlands larger than football stadiums and changing the chemistry of the air and water. The export facilities now ring Calcasieu Lake, a gourd-shaped body of water separated from the Gulf of Mexico by a narrow channel that cuts through a stretch of wetlands.

Many chemical plants and refineries sit in low-lying coastal zones, especially vulnerable to flooding. But LNG export terminals need very special coastal sites at the water’s edge that have enough depth and space to handle the deepwater, supertanker ships that carry LNG on its ocean voyages to Asia and Europe. Until recently, most of Louisiana’s large oil and gas facilities sat well inland from the Gulf. Sitting back from the water gave oil refineries and chemical plants protection from storm surges and easy access to highways and pipelines.

LNG export terminals are different: Because they load gas right onto tanker ships, these facilities must sit right at the water’s edge, on land that is both undeveloped and especially vulnerable to flooding.

“All Louisiana has been affected all along, and the marshes and wetlands [near the Gulf] were among the first affected by the drilling for oil and gas,” said Michael Tritico, a longtime environmental activist who lives in southwest Louisiana. “But the [LNG] buildout down there, all that flaring and smoke, that is a new development.”

The wakes left by tankers in Lake Calcasieu were intolerable for lifelong fishermen and shrimpers like Dardar. The massive waves damaged his boat and forced Dardar and his fellow shrimpers to cluster into a corner of the lake where they all vied for a small share of the catch.

Then, recently, another gas company, Tellurian, announced plans to open a 1,200-acre terminal on the Calcasieu River, which empties into the lake. Dardar and other shrimpers feared that the shipping traffic to the second terminal could push them out for good. ‘To Dardar, it seemed like some sort of cosmic joke. He’d survived decades of deadly hurricanes only to leave Isle de Jean Charles as the threats of natural disaster became too great.

He moved to Cameron and regained some sense of stability, only to have the fossil-fuel industry rise up around him, challenging his livelihood. In fact, the plants came to Cameron for the same reason Dardar did: Calcasieu Lake. For gas companies, the lake is an ideal access point for LNG tankers coming in from the Gulf of Mexico.

This summer, Dardar made a choice he’d fought hard to avoid. He took a buyout from Venture Global and used the money to move his family 20 minutes north to the town of Kaplan, where he could continue shrimping in nearby Intra-coastal City.

It’s now been a month since they moved. He sleeps better at night. The air, too, is easier to breathe. “Kind of feel like we’re at home,” Dardar said of the new property in Kaplan. He described the final months in Cameron as eerily similar to the end of his time on Isle de Jean Charles: pushed out by a force beyond his control.

Pushed out, by forces beyond his control

Travis Dardar, standing near the spot where he usually took out his boat to go shrimping. But LNG plants came to Cameron for the same reason Dardar did: Calcasieu Lake. For gas companies, the lake is an ideal access point for LNG tankers coming in from the Gulf of Mexico. Credit: Grist / Lyle Yost.
Most mornings, Nathan Berwick rises well before dawn at his home in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana, setting out on nearby Lake Charles in a small fishing boat to check his crab traps. If it’s not too hot and the water is calm, Berwick’s family occasionally joins him on the boat. His eleven-year-old daughter enjoys playing with baby crabs that fall from the traps as Berwick hauls them from the water.

Berwick comes from a long line of crabbers dating back to the 1820s, when his ancestors first arrived in the heel of the Louisiana boot – the state’s southwest corner.

“Thirty years from now I want my children to be able to say, ‘this is my home, this is where eight generations of Berwicks have lived,’” he said.

But this simple dream is in danger from a growing threat facing Berwick and others who contribute to – and depend on – the $1.5 billion fishing industry along Louisiana’s Gulf Coast.

“The gas export industry is going to be the nail in the coffin for the fishermen and their ability to survive,” said Anne Rolfes, director of the grassroots group Louisiana Bucket Brigade, which works with towns and neighborhoods impacted by pollution from oil and gas infrastructure.

Booming natural gas exports threatening Gulf Coast fishing communities

SHANNON KELLEHER

Most existing LNG and planned terminals are situated along the Gulf Coast, perhaps in part due to the region’s oil- and gas-friendly regulatory environment. The US recently became the world’s largest LNG exporter following an increase in global prices for methane gas after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which led to 45 long-term contracts to export US-produced methane overseas, according to a 2023 report by environmental and consumer advocacy nonprofits.

But while the industry claims US LNG exports will help support national security in Europe, the report finds that more than three-fourths of the LNG stipulated in the new contracts will be shipped to Asia or commodity traders. The Biden administration has largely supported US LNG exports, which generated $35 billion in revenue through September in 2022 – more than four times the revenue generated in the same period in 2021.

US enthusiasm for LNG exports comes as the world waffles on what its relationship with oil and gas should look like as climate change continues to escalate. On September 9, global leaders at the G20 summit in India, whose members include the US, vowed to triple renewable energy but failed to reach a deal to phase out fossil fuels. If the LNG export industry continues to expand as expected, it could become nearly impossible to keep global temperatures from increas-
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(Nathan Berwick with his boat and crab traps. Photo by Lori Cooke.)
ing less than 1.5 degrees Celsius,
which scientists have identified as
a threshold for the worst impacts
of climate change, according to a
December 2020 report by the Na-
tural Resources Defense Council
(NRDC).
The US currently has five LNG
terminals operating on the Gulf
Coast, in Louisiana and Texas. Two
of the Louisiana terminals are
located adjacent to communities
at opposite ends of Calcasieu Lake — Venture Global’s Calcasieu
Pass, which started sending out ex-
port cargoes in 2022, and Sempra
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gan in 2020, according to a 2022
report by the Louisiana Bucket
Brigade. Almost three-quarters
of these incidents have result-
ved from repeated failures by the
same piece of equipment, the
thermal oxidizers. Whenever they
shut off, the plant releases meth-
ane, volatile organic compounds
(VOCs), and cancer-causing ben-
zene into the air.
While the Environmental Pro-
tection Agency (EPA) has found
that Cameron LNG has underre-
ported the emissions from these
incidents, the report says that the
company has not been penalized.
Furthermore, although the Calca-
sieu Pass facility has been in op-
eration for less than two years,
its tenure has been “rife with flaring
and accidents,” according to the
Bucket Brigade report.
Flaring, when a terminal releas-
es and burns gases, is considered
a mechanism for safety and pollu-
tion control. But if the hydrocar-
bons it releases aren’t completely
burned, they can contribute to air
pollution and pose a huge safety
hazard, said John Allaire, a re-
tired engineer and environmental
consultant who lives in Cameron
Parish, a little over a mile from
the Calcasieu Pass terminal.
“I see how they operate every
day,” said Allaire, who has been
documenting the Calcasieu Pass
terminal’s flaring incidents. Al-
laire said he found that the facility
flared during 84 of its first 90 days
of operation. Venture Global has
reported very few of these incidents
to the Louisiana Department of En-
vironmental Quality, a Louisiana
Bucket Brigade analysis found.
Later this year, Venture Global
plans to begin construction on
another facility, Calcasieu Pass 2
(CP2), next to the existing Cal-
casieu Pass terminal (the project
has not yet been fully approved by
federal regulators). A new facility,
Commonwealth LNG, is set to be-
to become Allaire’s next door neighbor.
“Theyir flares will be about 750 feet
away from my property boundary
and their main turbines and com-
pressors will be about 1,250 feet
away from my residence area,” said
Allaire.
Allaire owns 300 acres, about 100
of which recently burned in the
climate change-fueled fires ravag-
ing Louisiana. The fires have come
close to the local LNG terminals, he
said, burning right up to the edges
of the storm protection barriers
that surround them. He worries that
improper operating practices could
turn a wildfire near an LNG plant
into a bigger emergency. If a piece
of flaming ash carried by strong
winds was swept into the plant and
hit a leak source, it could catch fire,
he said.
“If they don’t have leaking hydro-
carbons in the plant, then they’re
not going to have a fire in the plant,”
said Allaire. “If they have leaks —
and all of them leak to some extent
— it could happen.”
Recent fires have come within a
mile or so of ten different sites that
either currently have operating LNG
terminals or have been proposed or
approved for future projects, said
Morgan Johnson, a staff attorney for
the NRDC.
In 2018, federal regulators forced
the Cheniere Energy LNG facility
twenty-five miles away to tempo-
arily shut down two storage tanks
after the discovery of a large crack.
“The tanks were leaking and they kept
operating them and lost thousands
and thousands of cubic feet of natural gas,”
said Allaire. “If there had been a fire
then and a flame had actually gotten
in there, it would have been a disaster.”
Sometimes, when he’s at home, Al-
laire hears the sound of equipment
alarms going off at Calcasieu Pass. Last
spring, he said he attended a meeting
with a high-ranking Venture Glob-
al official. Allaire asked if the alarms
meant he should shelter in place. The
official, who did not respond to a re-
quest for comment from The New
Lede, told Allaire to call 911 if he
thinks he is in danger, he said.
Now when he hears the unsettling
sound, Allaire watches and waits. “I
just keep an eye on it and get ready to
move if I see anything bad starting to
develop over there,” he said.
According to a Federal Energy Reg-
ulatory Commission (FERC) resource
for landowners affected by natural gas
facilities, compressor stations have gas
and fire detection systems and emer-
gency shutdown equipment “designed
to ensure that in the event of an acci-
dent, the compressor station would be
safely shut down with minimal risk to
the public.”
Venture Global and Sempra Energy
did not respond to The New Lede’s
requests for comment about concerns
related to their LNG facilities.

A sinking seafood industry
The Louisiana seafood industry ac-
counts for one in every 70 jobs in the
state, with shrimp bringing in $1.3
billion and crabs bringing in $293 mil-
lion.
Companies are often owned by fam-
ilies that have lived in the region for
generations, many of which are the
Cajun descendants of exiles who fled
French colonies in what is now Can-
da following the French and Indian
War, according to Lori Cooke, a pro-
gram coordinator for the Louisiana
Bucket Brigade and a fifth-generation
resident.
Just 25 years ago, the fishing industry
in southwest Louisiana was thriving,
and the “biggest seafood provider anywhere in the world,” she said. But today, the industry is in trouble.

One local longliner fisherman who has been catching red snapper and other species since the 1970s told Cooke there used to be 100 fishermen like him that went out on the water every day, she said. Now, the number has dwindled to 12 or 15. That fisherman, she said, now works construction jobs to supplement his income.

“Nobody celebrates an LNG paradise,” said Cooke, noting that fishing and other traditions are what form southwest Louisiana’s identity.

At least four or five days a week, LNG tankers more massive than cruise ships make their way up and down the Calcasieu Ship Channel, said Cooke, which connects Lake Charles to much larger Calcasieu Lake and, ultimately, the Gulf of Mexico.

For crabbers like Berwick, the tanker traffic, which is set to increase as more LNG terminals are built, poses a major disruption. When the ships pass by, they create giant wakes that suck crab traps out into deeper water where they cannot be retrieved. This happens all the time, said Berwick, who recently gave up crabbing in the shipping channel.

“All last winter from November to April of this year, I was crabbing along the ship channel,” he said. “I got tired of losing traps. I probably lost 50 in a four- or five-month time.” With the traps valued at $50 apiece, Berwick estimates he lost $2,500 to $3,000 in gear during that brief period.

Dredging to widen the shipping channel for the LNG tankers has “pretty much changed the landscape from what it was in its natural form,” added Berwick. While Cameron LNG says mud from the dredging has been used to create 500 acres of marsh and wetlands, local shrimpers have complained that the activity prevents them from trawling. LNG projects could destroy 1,848 acres of wetlands, according to an analysis of FERC data by the watchdog group Oil and Gas Watch.

But Cooke suspects that LNG companies have benefited from past storms, too. Just as the community was regaining a sense of normalcy after the 2005 devastation of Hurricane Rita, it was hit by Hurricane Laura in 2020, one of the deadliest storms to make landfall in the state, followed by Hurricane Delta a few weeks later.

“Venture Global’s says that company held three public hearings for the Calcasieu Pass project between 2014 and 2018. “During each event, hundreds of people from the community attended the open houses to learn more about the project,” the company’s website says.

Louisiana senator Bill Cassidy wrote a letter in 2015 to the chairman of FERC expressing strong support for the Calcasieu Pass project and its related pipeline. “The last decade has created unprecedented opportunities for business growth and job creation throughout the US,” he wrote. “Nowhere is this more evident than in Louisiana and along the Gulf Coast.”

“This is where we live, this is where we grew up, this is all we know,” Berwick said. “Our families have lived here for years and years, generations, and [the LNG companies] just come in here all for the sake of money and destroy our community. I’m not saying they’re going to push us out, but it’s definitely not going to be somewhere where you’re going to want to raise your kids.”