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Charter boat captains helping feed the Keys

By Pru Sowers Key West Citizen

May 16, 2020



Augustin Puac, left, and Jesus Diaz fillet yellowtail snapper at Fishbusterz on Stock Island Thursday morning. Some 300 pounds of fresh fish is processed per day and given to the SOS Foundation and distributed as hot meals to residents in need of assistance. (ROB O'NEAL/The Citizen)

Sometimes it takes a village to feed a village.

With meat supplies erratic at best and charter fishing boats unable to take clients out to sea due to coronavirus restrictions, the St. Mary's Church kitchen and food pantry, Star of the Sea (SOS), has come up with a novel way to solve both those problems, at least on a small scale. SOS has created "St. Peter's Fleet," named after the patron saint of fisherman, to develop a new source for meat while putting out-of-work captains and crew back to work.

"It started with [food] supply chains shutting down. We couldn't get proteins. We couldn't get meat with the overwhelming demand for food," said Tom Callahan, SOS executive director.

In addition to its food pantries throughout the Florida Keys, SOS also prepares approximately 1,000 hot meals a day that are delivered to senior citizens and others who, for age or medical reasons, are sequestered in their homes. Protein is critical to a healthy, balanced diet and when spot shortages became more widespread, Callahan's thoughts turned to the ocean, teaming with fish. He started talking to boat captains and then secured funding for 50, \$16-an-hour, 40-hour-per-week positions that would get people back to work while at the same time providing a sustainable source of protein to those in need in Monroe County. Currently, there are four charter fishing vessels participating, three in Key West and one in Marathon, but the plan is to expand to 10 boats further up the Florida Keys.

There were initially a lot of hoops to jump through to get St. Peter's Fleet out on the water. First, SOS had to find the money to pay the fishing crews and support staff to handle preparation and transportation. Then, how to optimize the amount of fish provided. Charter fishing boats have restrictions on the number of fish they can catch each day. But thanks to a push from state Attorney Dennis Ward and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Chairman Robert Spottswood, some restrictions were temporarily amended.



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Prepared meals of fresh tuna fill a table in the SOS Foundation's kitchen. (PRU SOWERS/The Citizen)

“They were stuck with recreation bag limits,” Callahan said of the charter boats. “So, [FWC] gave them commercial limits for certain species of fish.”

That bag limit revision has led to the first four boats in St. Peter’s Fleet bringing in anywhere between 300 and 500 pounds of fish a day: snapper, tuna, swordfish, kingfish and amberjacks. And it has led to 11 laid-off workers from the hospitality industry being put back to work helping with preparing and transporting the fish, plus a planned 39 boat captains and crew being able to go back out on the seas.

Captain Billy Wickers III, owner of two charter boats, the Linda D VI and Linda D V (the “D” stands for darling), has made about 18 trips out with four crew members, each making \$16 an hour for a nine-hour shift. While grant funding will pay for the wages, SOS is paying \$300 per trip for gas, bait and tackle out of its own pocket.

“Being a fisherman, we’re used to being out on the water. Sitting at home doing nothing has never been my cup of tea. It drives me crazy,” Wickers said, adding, “We’re helping the community but [SOS] is helping out the fishermen. Being able to get a little something has been a blessing. And getting out and doing what we love to do has been a bonus.”

It’s not just charter fishermen helping out. Preparing hundreds of pounds of fish for cooking and distribution is another huge job, one that Colleen Quirk, owner of Fishbusterz Retail Seafood Market on Stock Island, was happy to assist with. She is paying her crew to fillet the fish when it comes in, about 300 pounds a day when the weather cooperates. After seeing the lines of 800-plus cars waiting to pick up food at the SOS food pantry in Key West, Quirk was on board.

“We understood the desperation of people at that point. So, we were, ‘anything we can do,’” Quirk said about joining St. Peter’s Fleet. “Getting fisherman jobs and getting protein to the community was a win-win. And helping the mental health of fishermen to get back on the water is a win-win-win.”



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From left, Joey Mercurio, Ryan O’Keefe, Phil Demena, Billy Wickers III and A.J. Staggs show off a recent catch being donated to the SOS Foundation. (PRU SOWERS/The Citizen)

SOS isn't the only organization helping catch fish for distribution to hungry families. Capt. Jim Sharpe of Sea Boots Charters in Summerland Key is giving his catch away for free. So is his son-in-law, Capt. Mike Weinhofer, of Compass Rose Charters on Charterboat Row in Key West. Weinhofer goes out every day he can and fillets the fish to give raw to people who text – do not call, he asks – him at 305-395-3474. He started his Fish for Families program after Hurricane Irma. The coronavirus pandemic put it back in operation.

"I don't want to say people are desperate but the demand has been huge," Weinhofer said. "I've got 60-odd texts right now I have to fill."

Weinhofer said there are other captains on charter boat row who are donating fish as well, including Al Ware, Dave Heeter and Steve Kijak. The captains are paying their own costs for each trip, which can add up to hundreds of dollars.

"It gets a little expensive. But luckily, we don't have to go far out," Weinhofer said, adding, "We're back to the old days of people just helping each other."

"We've always been a tight community," agreed Cpt. Wickers. "We've always had each other's backs."

SOS' Callahan said government and private grants are paying for the program. He singled out the Ocean Reef Community Foundation for its help as well as CareerSource South Florida, which is funding up to 50 jobs for six months in St. Peter's Fleet.

"It's getting people back to work for humanitarian causes," Callahan said. "People are getting a decent wage while helping the community."

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