



Marine industry hit hard by damage to docks, yachts

By *STEPHANIE MURPHY, Daily News Business and Real Estate Writer*

Sunday, Sept. 12, 2004 — One yacht that summers in Newport may winter there as well because the owner's Palm Beach dock was among many destroyed last week.

The Marine Industries Association of Palm Beach County still is estimating the total damage to docks, sea walls and boats — plus the lost business for hundreds of marine companies that were idled for more than a week.

"Most people's boats are in the Northeast now. But I have two clients whose docks are gone. It's not the cost of repairs. By the time he could get the permits, it would be well into season, so it's hardly worth it to bring the boat down," said John Rau of Palm Beach, an attorney with Gunster Yoakley.

His client and other residents of the lakefront are the victims of boats that don't belong where they landed during the wee hours of Labor Day weekend. That's when the restless southwesterly winds of Hurricane Frances barreled toward the North End, tearing loose the anchors of yachts and boats moored in the Intracoastal Waterway.

A few hours later, more than 40 hulls lay against crumbled docks and sea walls between the Lake Worth Inlet and the Flagler Memorial Bridge, said marine industry spokeswoman Margie Yansur.

Some of the worst destruction occurred at the Sailfish Club, a double hardship because one of its three docks burned just four months ago after a fire aboard a yacht.

"The worst destruction I've seen was at the Sailfish Club. The south dock is gone. The center one is OK, but the north dock was already condemned after the fire," said Gary Lickle of Palm Beach, a club member who moved his boat to the Palm Beach Yacht Center in Boynton Beach before Frances hit.

When the anchor of the 105-foot Ivana broke loose and the yacht landed on a sea wall by the home of Alfonso Fanjul — and the 100-foot Explorer I lost control and bounced between the Palm Beach Yacht Club and the island — "they looked like Ping-Pong balls out there," Lickle said. Winds moving from the west-southwest "like a freight train" dumped most of the debris at the island's northeast quadrant and at Singer Island.

Sailfish Marina in Palm Beach Shores also sustained dock damage from boats moored off-shore. The marina was set to reopen Saturday, Yansura said, but its neighbor, Cannonsport Marina, was not so lucky.

"There was extensive damage to the docks, and they're out of business for now. Their customers had removed boats to safe storage, but five boats anchored in the Intracoastal broke loose and slammed into his docks. Some were derelict boats and uninsured," Yansura said.

The Town Docks at Peruvian, Australian and Brazilian avenues are damaged, mostly because of seven boats that were left there during Frances — "and because a dock broke free next door and landed on top of ours," said Dockmaster John Luscomb. "The last finger pier on the Brazilian Dock is very badly damaged" and will cost about \$100,000 to repair.

The Locomotion, a 31-foot GradyWhite, partially sank and is a total loss, he said. Fiberglass on the starboard side and both engines, worth about \$35,000, were damaged by the storm.

A boat that's been under water would need new wood, wiring, plumbing and bulkheads, so insurance companies may total it rather than repair and reinsure it, said Luscomb, who used to manage a boatyard.

Amazing Grace, a 61-foot yacht, lost its dive platform, had damage on the starboard side, has a dangling tender and a shredded Bimini top — amounting to no more than a few thousand dollars in damages. More amazing was the luck of Sovereign Reality, a 74-footer that snapped about 10 starboard lines, Luscomb said.

"The only thing that held the boat in the marina was one piling. The port bow and twin power cords wore about 8 inches out of the piling. I can't believe the luck. The damage is so minor, for a \$2 million boat," Luscomb said.

"There usually are 40 to 50 boats here this time of year, and I got all but seven to leave. I can't force them to leave, and some don't have a plan," he said. As a result, one town dock can't be used because of a destroyed power pedestal — the pod that delivers electricity, water pressure and cable TV to the tenant.

Based on normal transient revenue from tenants, the dock damage will cost the town about \$40,000 in slip rental, Luscomb said. "The majority of my people are annuals. They pay year-round and we take our fees in advance."

The good news for vendors awaiting supplies and for shipping companies delivering goods to the Port of Palm Beach is that Frances did not deposit any wrecks in the shipping lane, said Tim Murphy with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"Survey crews have been at Peanut Island and the port to see whether the channel would have to be dredged. The Coast Guard did a sonar scan and did not detect any vessels in the federal channel. It's clear except for shoal material," Murphy said.

Insurance executive Bruce Gendelman said the issue of liability for dock damage is not clear — it may be the boat owner or the dock owner. None of his clients had boat damage, partly because storm preparedness is required for his company's large-yacht underwriting program, Gendelman said. f+t

f-t The marine association is still tallying boat-related hardships. Boatyards without electricity couldn't make repairs; firms that need nautical gear and materials couldn't buy any; storage firms had to take a triage approach to avoid clogging valuable slips with boats that can't be saved; and longer-term, marinas that depend on tourism may not recover in time for the season.

Tim Oenbrink, owner of Merritt Marine, a wholesaler that supplies other sectors, went to customers who couldn't get to him, Yansura said: "The sales staff called on marinas to see what they need, a generator or whatever, to get customers back in business so Merritt can get going."

"Work is stopped from Delray to Vero. We'll lose a few weeks of production now, but the biggest long-term effect is, boats that were stored now have no home. They have nowhere to go," Oenbrink said.

Cracker Boy Boat Works, a do-it-yourself yard for boat owners, actually gained business during a usually quiet period, as frantic owners worked to get boats out of the water.

Rybovich Spencer was already planning a major expansion, and hurricane damage took that project from "want-to to have-to," said President Jim Bronstien.

"All marinas are older and fatigued. We survived, but this took years off the life of our facilities. This will

accelerate our expansion, but it can take years to get new docks. We hope we can get the bureaucracy to cooperate with the industry and owners to solve the problem. We can't just take in all these destroyed boats to sit for months while owners sort it out. We're doing our part, but we're taking repairable boats first," Bronstien said.

Before Hurricane Frances, demand far exceeded the supply of boat slips near Palm Beach, Bronstien said. Yansura agreed: "The county already had a serious shortage. If the slip you rented is gone, it will be difficult to find a replacement. If your boat is too big to trailer, it means you can't use it for a year or so until docks are rebuilt."

People preparing for Hurricane Ivan should bear in mind that boats in the water during Frances may be weakened, Luscomb said.

"When we shut off power [Sept. 2], they were on batteries to keep the bilge pumps running. Those cycles were drawing juice and wearing down the batteries."

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