Traditionally, the coastal counties of Alabama have relied on access to the water for their livelihood. Generations of families, based in towns like Bayou La Batre, operate fishing boats, seafood processing facilities, boat yards, and support industries. These water-dependent industries have tremendous economic impacts on the state:

- Dockside value of landings: $36 million
- Estimated economic value: $127 million
- Plant value of processed product: $135 million
- Number of working shrimp boats: 240
- Number of other commercial fishing licenses: 1,000
- Number of shipyards/annual revenue: $100 million
- Net makers, fuel docks, general suppliers: 14

More and more, water access and dock space are being lost in this area due to changes in land use and development pressures. The effects of Hurricanes Ivan and Katrina have hastened these changes. Without access and docking – a working waterfront – water-dependent industries will not be able to operate and related businesses also will suffer. In addition to economic losses, the traditional community culture and character could be lost if working waterfronts disappear.

Groups in states like Maine, North Carolina, and Florida, are working to ensure waterfront access for fishermen and water-dependent businesses. In Maine and Florida, large and diverse groups of stakeholders, including fishermen, realtors, recreational clubs, and state officials, formed coalitions to address working waterfronts. Maine used ordinances, legislation, and grant funding as tools to preserve water access for fishermen. North Carolina has formed the Waterfront Access Study Committee to examine the degree of loss and potential loss of diversity of uses along the coastal shoreline and how the losses impact access to the state’s public trust waters.

There are many ways to protect and preserve access, including grants, tax incentives, and property purchases. As the result of a Sea Grant-led workshop, the Alabama Working Waterfronts Coalition has formed with a goal of maintaining a sustainable working waterfront. Coalition activities include the investigation of potential legislative actions and, in cooperation with MASGC, an inventory of the current status of working waterfronts in Mobile County, Ala.

Through organized efforts, access may be protected for traditional water-dependent industries in coastal Alabama, preserving the traditional community character and way of life.