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HEADLINE: Waves don't dampen spirits in Venice;  
For fishers, storm is merely a bother

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BODY:  
Venice Marina stands outside the protection of Louisiana's coastal levee system, but the waves cresting the harbor's wooden docks weren't Jeff Edgecombe's greatest concern as Tropical Storm Isidore bore down on the tiny port town Thursday morning.

Flooding severed the only route to safety and a 7-foot alligator wandered into the driveway, but for someone who spends most of his time beyond the levees, Edgecombe said, this storm caused little fear. Instead, like his boss, his neighbors and the captains of dozens of fishing vessels that gathered behind the meager shelter of several small jetties last week after failing to reach greater protection inshore, Edgecombe shrugged off the weather and concerned himself with something really important.

Breakfast.

"Steak and eggs and biscuits and croissants," he said. "We kept our bellies full. It was kind of a mellow situation here."

Commercial fishers, oil platform workers and others who live and labor on the open coastal waters displayed a similar casual composure Thursday morning. Though deputies touted the success of early evacuation efforts, many of those in the most vulnerable regions of the southeastern coast decided to stay put. While flooding from the storm may have wreaked havoc with traffic patterns in the city and suburbs, in Venice, where marinas and docks jut from the marsh on isolated pockets of land, it necessitated only minimal changes to the daily routine.

Larry Buras, for example, said a local curfew forced him to wait until 5 a.m. before opening the One Stop convenience store just south of Port Sulphur -- two hours later than usual. But even though sheets of rain pounded against the aluminum siding, and the commercial fishers who make up much of his customer base stopped in to chat instead of buying supplies, commerce continued unabated, he said.

Got the beer

"The Frito-Lay guy came by yesterday (Wednesday), trying to sell some chips," he laughed. "I run him off. Then the Budweiser guy came to take orders. So I ordered some Budweiser, because that'll be here Saturday. There's no mail at the Empire post office, but the Budweiser guy is taking orders."

The same spirit reigned at Joshua's Marina in Buras, where local fishers entertained crews from the Weather Channel and waited out the storm with cold beers, at least until deputies enforced a mandatory evacuation order from the parish that included a temporary ban on the sale of alcohol. Still, many regulars were on hand in the pre-dawn hours Thursday to watch the building become an offshore island as the waters rose.

One was Tommy "Raisin" Bowers, who rose early to check the lines securing his round-sterned shrimp boat. The atmosphere was lighthearted, but Bowers knew that he and his colleagues had gotten lucky.

"Look at this," he said, pointing to where water gushed through the makeshift earthworks protecting Empire harbor. "The water's right up to the sandbags. Then what are you going to do?"

As Sheriff Jiff Hingle made his rounds of the parish during the storm's worst weather, checking up on those in Venice, Buras and elsewhere along the coast, he echoed the feeling.

Could've been worse

"If this was to hit us as a Category 4, we'd have been in a mess," he said. "There'd be nothing left to come back to."

Nobody knew that better than Johnny Robinson of Buras. Just before the storm hit, he and a friend had secured their boats at the edge of Venice harbor, protected from the pounding Gulf surf by a thin ribbon of stone. The friend decided to ride out the storm on board while Robinson went home. But at dawn Thursday, Robinson waited anxiously for the waters to recede enough to allow him access to the harbor road.

Only when his cell phone rang did he relax, shooing away his concern with a wave of his hand.

"It was him," he said. "He's OK. The boats are OK. Everyone made it, no problem."

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