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## **Marine contractors continue strong business despite heavy regulation**

**BYLINE:** **Bill Church** correspondent

Ask established marine contractors about their biggest headaches in building docks and sea walls and you'll get two answers: Red tape and crooked competitors. Despite those problems, local builders say their business is good and shows no signs of weakening.

The construction of docks and sea walls is one of the most heavily regulated businesses in Florida. Various state, federal and local agencies protect the manatees, save the seagrass, ensure that proper materials are used and guarantee that workers are properly insured.

Those all are laudable aims, say state and Treasure Coast contractors, but government rules add time and money to each project.

The manatee protection plan and environmental regulations, for example, severely limit the number of slips that can be built in a marina, based on a ratio of slips to shoreline footage. If tied to construction of a condominium, regulations call for one boat slip for each unit. As a result, fewer private marinas are being built, except at condo sites, according to Steven Webster, executive director of the Florida Marine Contractors Association.

For homeowners wanting to build single docks, Webster points to greatly increased time and costs associated with the regulations.

"What we have done in the state of Florida, with good intentions and bad results, is create a system where honest contractors meet all the permitting requirements, while less scrupulous dock builders skip the permit because the process is punitive and fraught with delay," Webster said.

The permit process can involve the Florida Department of Environmental Resources, the Army Corps of Engineers, state and federal fish and wildlife agencies, the local water management district and the local municipality for a building permit. According to Webster and most contractors, the process can take six

to nine months, so many homeowners go with a company that promises to put up a dock immediately.

Worker insurance is another major issue for contractors, said Jay Connors, president of MRMC Construction Inc. and Pelican Pete's Marine Construction Inc. in Vero Beach. Federal law requires any contractor working over navigable waters to have longshoreman's insurance, originally designed for companies building big docks for oceangoing vessels. Connors' workers build only small docks over two to three feet of water.

"If you fall off our docks, you just stand up," Connors laughed. "Nevertheless, we comply with the law and buy this very expensive insurance, while many unscrupulous contractors don't. With their much lower costs, it's a non-level playing field."

Despite these obstacles, most Florida and Treasure Coast dock building companies report strong business. The Florida Marine Contractors Association estimates dock and seawall building in Florida is a \$1.3 billion industry based on its surveys. Webster said Treasure Coast marine contractors are ahead of the statewide 10 to 12 percent annual growth rates because of the heavy storm damage here combined with the influx of residents.

Connors, for example, bought Pelican Pete's in 2003 and MRMC in 2004. He reports three to four times as much dollar volume for Pelican Pete's and twice as much for MRMC since his purchase. Among other things, he credits greatly increased repair and reconstruction work generated by the hurricanes.

Unlike Connors' Indian River County business, which serves mainly the residential market, 90 percent of Stuart-based Custom Built Marine's business is in the commercial market. In business more than 18 years, Custom Built offers services including engineering, planning and concrete and steel sheet piling work, in addition to the traditional dock building and sea wall construction.

Ray Corrigan said he and his brother, David, started with a pickup truck and a station wagon. "We grossed about \$100,000 the first year, but last (jump page missing)

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