



Contact: Lesli Bales-Sherrod
301-427-2300 ext. 115

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NOAA's Fisheries Service Cracks Down on Charter Boat Companies Operating Illegally

Charter boat companies feeling the sting of unfair competition have looked to NOAA's Fisheries Service Office of Law Enforcement for help.

After receiving multiple complaints about allegedly illegal charter boat trips undercutting legal businesses, undercover agents with NOAA OLE's southeast enforcement division and state special operations divisions from Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas chartered trips on vessels across the Gulf of Mexico and documented numerous violations for operating without federal charter boat moratorium permits.

NOAA's Office of General Counsel has sent notices of violation and assessment to owners and operators of 15 charter boats, detailing alleged violations of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

"The goal of this type of investigation is not only to document illegal activity for prosecution, but also to protect law-abiding charter operations from unfair competition," said Hal Robbins, special agent in charge of the NOAA division in St. Petersburg, Fla.

On June 16, 2003, NOAA's Fisheries Service placed a moratorium on charter boat permits for both the Gulf reef fish and coastal migratory pelagics fisheries in an effort to maintain sustainability of the species there, including red snapper, one of the most over-fished resources in the Gulf of Mexico. Since this moratorium, the only way to obtain a permit is to purchase one from an existing holder, which has raised the value of the permits to between \$8,000 and \$10,000.

"Business is being taken away from legal charter boat companies because the illegal companies, who do not obtain permits, can charge much less for trips," explained OLE special agent Charles Tyer of the Galveston, Texas, field office.

Also documented during the one-year operation were several other federal fisheries violations, including undersize fish, harvesting fish during a closed season, filleting fish at sea, concealing fish from enforcement, and failure to use venting tools, dehookers and circle hooks to fish for reef fish.

Multiple state and U.S. Coast Guard violations were detected as well.

"With the current status of the red snapper fishery, law enforcement plays an essential part ensuring that all participants play by the same rules," said Robby Byers, executive director of Coastal Conservation Association of Texas. "It is unfortunate that there are always a few that feel the laws do not apply to them. Violating regulations only hurts the ones that are trying to do the right thing. CCA commends the special agents of NOAA that are tasked with catching those who jeopardize our public resources."

The mission of NOAA OLE is to ensure compliance with the laws and regulations enacted to conserve and protect our nation's marine resources. Anyone with information regarding illegal charter fishing should contact the national hotline at 1-800-853-1964.

NOAA understands and predicts changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and conserves and manages our coastal and marine resources. Visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.

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