



Contact: Lesli Bales-Sherrod
301-427-2300 ext. 103
lesli.bales-sherrod@noaa.gov

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NOAA's Enforcement Actions in the Gulf of Mexico Help Ensure Safe Seafood
Shrimp trawlers face fines for fishing over the summer in area closed due to BP oil spill

Eight shrimp trawlers have been charged by NOAA with allegedly fishing this summer in the area of the Gulf of Mexico that was closed due to the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill. The notices of violation and assessment (NOVAs) were issued as part of NOAA's effort to help ensure the seafood reaching America's dinner tables was safe – and to protect the livelihoods of Gulf fishermen who were respecting the closures.

All of the eight shrimp trawlers' catches – about 107,500 pounds of shrimp – were returned to the water to ensure the potentially tainted seafood did not come to market. All eight vessels were boarded by the U.S. Coast Guard off the coast of Louisiana in June, July, or August, with the most recent NOVA being issued Nov. 3.

"Throughout the oil spill event this summer, stringent enforcement of the closed areas was essential to ensuring both seafood safety and consumer confidence in Gulf seafood," said Eric Schwaab, assistant NOAA administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "NOAA remains determined to protect the fishermen who follow the rules and the American public who eat the seafood they catch."

NOAA's Office of General Counsel for Enforcement and Litigation (GCEL) issued the first NOVA in July, five NOVAs in September, one in October and one earlier this month. NOVAs are issued after the Coast Guard and NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) complete their investigations.

Six of the shrimp vessels were assessed civil penalties of \$15,000 for allegedly fishing in the closed area, and one of the six was assessed an additional \$3,000 for two alleged violations involving bycatch reduction devices. Bycatch reduction devices are special openings sewn into a shrimp trawler's nets to allow non-targeted species such as red snapper to escape, while retaining shrimp.

A seventh shrimp trawler received a \$50,000 NOVA -- \$30,000 for allegedly fishing in the closed area a second time after having been previously warned by state officials, and \$20,000 for four alleged violations regarding turtle excluder devices, special nets with openings that allow turtles to escape and not drown. The openings in this vessel's nets were allegedly too small to allow larger, mature turtles to escape.

Earlier this month, GCEL issued a \$20,000 NOVA to an eighth shrimp vessel for allegedly fishing in the closed area in August, following significant public outreach and prior enforcement actions putting the regulated community on notice that fishing in the closed areas was prohibited.

"Our outreach and enforcement efforts worked, and most of the fishing industry readily complied with the closed areas resulting from the oil spill in order to ensure seafood safety," said Hal Robbins, special agent in charge of NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement southeast division.

The ships' owners and operators have 30 days to respond to NOVAs by paying the penalty, seeking to have it modified, or requesting a hearing before an administrative law judge. To date, one respondent has paid in full, and that case has been closed. One has requested a hearing, which is set for Jan. 18, and the other parties still have time to respond.

NOAA also continues to work closely with the FDA and the Gulf states to ensure seafood safety. NOAA and FDA are working together on broad-scale seafood sampling that includes sampling seafood from inside and outside the closure area, as well as dockside and market-based sampling.

The mission of NOAA's OLE is to ensure compliance with the laws and regulations enacted to conserve and protect our nation's marine resources. To report a suspected violation, contact OLE's national hotline at 1-800-853-1964.

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Visit us at <http://www.noaa.gov> or on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/usnoaagov>.