



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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 22, 2010

NOAA and Coast Guard Actively Enforcing Gulf of Mexico Closed Fishing Area
Catches in closed area abandoned at sea, maintaining integrity of Gulf seafood

NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) and the U.S. Coast Guard continue to actively enforce the law in federal waters that have been closed to fishing to balance economic and public health needs as a result of the BP oil spill. Since the first closure was announced on May 2, the agencies have worked together to patrol waters and docks to identify violations associated with the closure, leading fishermen to abandon catches to prevent potentially tainted seafood from entering U.S. seafood markets.

OLE also has brought in additional people to provide a greater presence on the docks and on the water and continues to work both with the U.S. Coast Guard and its state partners to protect the integrity of the nation's seafood.

OLE and the U.S. Coast Guard actions have led to 13 illegal catches being abandoned at sea, and OLE is awaiting the receipt of State cases made in the Federal closed area to determine what actions to take on those cases. OLE refers more severe violations to NOAA's Office of General Counsel for Enforcement and Litigation (GCEL) for their review and possible prosecution. Less severe violations may merit verbal warnings (also known as Fix-It tickets) or written warnings, which count as prior violations.

NOAA's first Notice of Violation and Assessment in connection to the oil spill was issued in response to a June 22 violation. The shrimp trawler involved has been assessed a \$15,000 penalty for fishing in the portion of the Gulf of Mexico closed due to the BP oil spill. GCEL is reviewing other cases and notes more NOVAs likely will be issued.

In the meantime, OLE has issued two written warnings and has others pending.

"Stringent enforcement of the fishing closed areas is critically important to ensure product safety and consumer confidence in Gulf seafood during the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill event," said Eric Schwaab, NOAA assistant administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "We share the fishing community's concern that their catch be recognized as not coming from the closed area and that it is free of oil contamination."

The closed area now represents 83,927 square miles, which is approximately 35 percent of Gulf of Mexico federal waters. All commercial and recreational fishing, including catch and release, is prohibited within this area under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

Both owners and operators of vessels fishing in the closed areas are subject to the seizure of their catch, gear, and vessel; civil penalties of up to \$140,000 per violation; and permit sanctions up to permanent revocation of their permit. OLE has worked with the fishing community to notify boats of changes in the closed area through Vessel Monitoring System messages, email alerts, radio transmissions and phone calls.

OLE also has reached out to minority communities by working with the representative of a local Vietnamese community non-profit organization who regularly acts as an intermediary and advocate for the local Vietnamese fishing fleet, meeting with the largest shrimp dealer in the state who services the majority of the Vietnamese shrimping fleet, and enlisting the aid of a

NOAA contract observer who has often assisted the Vietnamese fishermen with VMS and permitting issues and NOAA lab personnel who are working with two Vietnamese long lines on scientific projects.

Meanwhile, NOAA has developed Vietnamese and Spanish translations of a fishery bulletin with general information on the closure, Vietnamese and Spanish translations of the template for the fishery bulletin used to announce modifications to closed area boundaries, and has added English, Vietnamese and Spanish options to the toll free number, which details the current closed area coordinates at any given time.

“Our outreach and enforcement efforts are working. Our agents, Coast Guard and state partners are doing outstanding work associated with the spill, and we stand ready to assist any fisherman that may have questions,” said Hal Robbins, special agent in charge of OLE’s Southeast Division, which includes the Gulf. “The vast majority of fishermen are staying out of the closed area and understand the importance of ensuring the high quality of seafood from the Gulf.”

NOAA has a number of methods for the public to obtain information or be notified when there is a change to the closed area:

- Sign up to receive Southeast Fishery Bulletins by email at SERO.Communications.Comments@noaa.gov
- Call 1-800-627-NOAA (1-800-627-6622) to hear a recording of the current coordinates (message in English, Vietnamese, and Spanish; coordinates in English)
- Listen to NOAA Weather Radio for messages about the closure
- Receive text messages on your cell phone about changes to the closed area by texting **fishing@gulf** to 84469 (visit <http://www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com/go/doc/2931/558107> for more information)
- Follow us on Twitter @usnoaagov to get a tweet when the closed area changes

The mission of NOAA 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>.