

Re: Crew size on dual permitted vessels

Dear Council members,

My name is Ed Walker. I have been a Gulf charter fisherman for 22 years. I fish out of Tarpon Springs, Florida. I am also an outdoor writer and hold 18 IGFA world records. I have been active in management issues and have participated in research projects for species such as gag, amberjack, goliath grouper, to name a few. Several years ago I was nominated by the Governor for the rec seat on the Gulf Council and currently am on the Coastal Migratory Pelagics AP.

I am writing to you today about removing the crew size limit issue for dual permitted vessels. I am one of the 172 vessel owners and the current restriction on crew size causes me and the others like me a great deal of difficulty and handicaps us against all other commercial boats even though today it serves very little purpose.

**No longer necessary with the IFQ and VMS system.**

Today we dual permitted vessels are required to maintain full time tracking via VMS, we must log out when departing, give 3 hours advance notice before returning to shore, report the fish onboard in advance, and land only at NOAA approved landing locations. That alone would make it nearly impossible to “double dip” with a paying charter group on a commercial trip. Please then consider that we have also now notified law enforcement of our pending arrival and given them ample time to be at the dock when we arrive, which they often are. Next consider that it is illegal for us to remove any fish from the boat unless it is at an official offload to a fish wholesaler. There is essentially no way anyone is going to get away with running an illegal charter under these regulations.

Now I ask you to ponder; is it fair that I would face severe federal fines and penalties for having 4 or 5 people onboard while I am legally logged in as a commercial trip? All other commercial vessels have no crew size limits, just ours. Should I be arrested for having 3 crew members helping me catch my legal quota? I have never had a violation for anything, but, if I were charged with one extra person on a commercial trip would the penalty be justified? Is it fair that the addition of a single crew member (from 3 to 4) CHANGES my official VMS declaration from commercial to charter when I am not running a charter?

We dual permitted vessel owners are not looking for a way to cheat. We jump through more hoops than most. We feel we are being penalized for something we are not doing. What we are asking you to do is to treat us the same as all other commercial vessels when we declare our trips

with NOAA enforcement as commercial. That means the same crew size limit-none. To quote Alternative 3 from a recent GMFMC options list *“This would simplify regulations and would place dual-permitted vessels when fishing commercially under the same regulations as commercial only permitted vessels.”* I am not aware if removing the crew size restriction is still listed as Alternative 3 but, if it is I ask that you to choose it. “Double dipping” would still be illegal and in reality it simply isn’t happening anymore. Today’s IFQ system and requirements has eliminated any possibility of it. Please, eliminate the crew size limit for all vessels that are logged in with NOAA as commercial. It is an outdated rule that continues to penalizing us today.

Thank you for your consideration,

Ed Walker

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