

The Gulf Fishermen's Association

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Dear GFA Member,

For almost two years GFA has advanced a lawsuit against the NMFS regarding the mandatory VMS requirement for permitted commercial reef fish vessels. Initially the courts ruled that our suit was filed after the filing deadline and dismissed our case. So we sued again, and the ruling was overturned. It was a minor success for our efforts, although it did expand the law and will be helpful to us in the future. At that point we were right back to square one, except with two years of VMS experience. During those years we also developed an IFQ program (to reduce overcapacity in the grouper fishery). The IFQ is critical to the future viability of commercial grouper fishing, and GFA is an ardent supporter of IFQs.

VMS and IFQs go hand in hand. It would be nearly impossible to implement the grouper IFQ without the information that VMSs provide. And since the health of our fishery is more important than the inconvenience of complying with VMS rules, we have been working with NMFS and our attorney, Mike Mastry, to reach a settlement that addresses our major concerns with VMS, in lieu of litigation.

VMS will be an instrumental part of making the IFQ program work as a whole.

Over the last eighteen months we have seen many benefits of the VMS: instant communications from vessel to home, secure vessel to vessel communications, tracking your own vessel or vessels, proving that our industry can be accountable.

Though we have seen a positive benefit from VMS, we have also identified some shortcomings. In settling this lawsuit, we will, along with NMFS, be asking the Gulf Council to form a VMS Advisory Panel (AP) to address the problems with this program. This AP should have been formed at the outset, but better late than not at all. We consider the creation of a VMS-AP a great opportunity for fishermen to address billing problems, tech support, reliability of units, use of data, restriction of access to data, law enforcement needs, future monies, more competition in pricing, program design, implementation in other fisheries, and other concerns. This is our chance to take a program that most of us didn't want, and make it work *for* us, rather than against us.

The AP will likely be made up with fishermen, industry reps, law enforcement, NGO's and VMS vendor reps. A notice will likely go out for applicants shortly after we finalize our settlement.

IFQs promote individual accountability, and so do VMSs. Individual accountability is the key to managing our fisheries. If each fisherman is accountable for his own actions, then the fleet as a whole will be accountable too. Consumers who benefit by eating the fresh fish we catch want to know that we harvest within legal limits, and maintain a sustainable stock. VMS may help prove that point. We have nothing to fear from showing that we obey the law.

Mike Mastry has agreed to receive your phone calls concerning the VMS case if you have any questions that you would like to ask. Mike can be reached at (727) 896-5191.

Thanks for your support.
Glen Brooks