

The Northeast's Fishing Newspaper for over 33 years
Commercial Fisheries News
Online Edition Updated Monthly A Compass Publication



Commercial Fisheries News
Volume 34 Number 7
March 2007

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Fishermen sound off over VMS problems

PORTSMOUTH, NH – Nearly a dozen fishing industry members attended a joint meeting of the New England Fishery Management Council's Vessel Monitoring System (VMS)/Enforcement Committee and its industry advisers on Feb. 6 prior to the council meeting here.

Fishermen spent the bulk of the time airing their frustrations over the current state of the vessel monitoring system (VMS) and days-at-sea data system.

A number of people told of having serious problems with erratic trip start and end e-mails that made it difficult to keep track of their days-at-sea.

Gloucester fisherman David Marciano explained that he only receives a fraction of his trip end e-mails. Other than calling the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), he said he had no way to keep track of his days-at-sea.

"At what point will this emerging technology be able to match up days-at-sea," he asked. "We don't know what we've used or what we have left."

Bill Semrau, VMS program manager at the NMFS Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) in Gloucester, was on hand to try to answer questions.

He said that fishermen should see an e-mail within a couple of hours of crossing the demarcation line.

"We need to put them in order if they're received out of order from the satellite vendor," Semrau said, explaining the delay.

Semrau added that the problems fishermen have been experiencing were the result of a shift in how the data is handled away from an outside vendor to an in-house system at NMFS. He said the shift had resulted in some "growing pains" and acknowledged that NMFS had to stop giving out days-at-sea information yet again during the week ending Feb. 2.

Semrau suggested that fishermen could ask that trip e-mails be sent to home computers and then fishermen could call if they wanted to know when a trip starts and ends.

Antiquated system

But that suggestion simply raised another concern among fishermen: Because NMFS staffers are only available during business hours, contacting them during normal fishing operations is not always a viable option. Also, it's often hard to call the agency from the boat.

"I have no cell phone coverage when I'm out fishing," said David Goethel, a Hampton, NH fisherman and member of the New England council.

Semrau pointed out that NMFS enforcement agents have access to VMS data feeds 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but he added that fishermen's first point of contact should be the vendor to be sure the feed is working accurately.



Portsmouth fisherman Erik Anderson said this was an antiquated way for fishermen to get days-at-sea information. He also said the NMFS Office of Law Enforcement should have anticipated the trouble fishermen would have monitoring their days-at-sea usage.

“I’m upset to hear the word ‘courtesy’ when I’m asking for days-at-sea information,” Anderson said. “This is a mandated system but the fisherman is always at fault.”

Hampton fisherman Carl Bouchard protested that a fisherman can be the best bookkeeper in the world and still not be able to keep track of his days-at-sea.

“When it works properly, I get trip e-mails at home and on the boat, but in that e-mail there is a disclaimer that says this may not be the actual amount charged to you,” he said.

Semrau said that the trip end e-mail provides the length of the trip, not the days-at-sea charges.

“These e-mails were never meant to give fishermen days-at-sea charges,” he said.

Rather, it’s the NMFS days-at-sea database that does the actual charging, and that means the number of days-at-sea a fisherman uses could be much larger if he declares into the Gulf of Maine differential days-at-sea area.

Craig Pendleton, coordinating director of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance and a Saco, ME fisherman, said he was having “more problems than ever before” with trip e-mails.

Pendleton explained that when he’s shrimp fishing, he tows back and forth near or over the demarcation line and that he is receiving trip end e-mails before receiving trip start e-mails.

“I am extremely concerned that I don’t know where I stand as we go into March and April,” he said.

Polling

Fishermen also had problems with polling charges.

Anderson wanted to know why, if a fisherman holds a permit in multiple fisheries but doesn’t declare into a stricter fishing category, he is polled more often.

“My Skymate bill has doubled from \$30 to \$60 a month,” he said.

Anderson suggested that if a fisherman declares into the multispecies fishery, he should be held to that and polled hourly even if he holds another permit, such as a general category 1B scallop that requires polling every half-hour.

“Herring vessels are allowed to shut off (VMS). However, if you’re declared in the multispecies fishery it records you 24/7,” observed Bouchard. “This almost makes me feel like asking, ‘Who is the bigger criminal supposed to be?’ If one segment is allowed to turn off in port, then all should be allowed.”

The NMFS Office of Law Enforcement has encouraged and recommended 24/7 reporting.

Said one official, “I realize that can be a burden, but if the boat stops reporting positions and we don’t know where the boat is, it’s an enforceability issue.”

Bouchard said he could understand that position, but added that it didn’t make any sense for multispecies fishermen who have only an average of 24 days-at-sea out of 365.

“On my boat, I have to run a genset for the VMS and with the cost of fuel (it’s expensive),” he said. “My boat has to swing on a mooring for over 200 days a year with the VMS on so that you know where I am when I go fishing. It’s ridiculous,” said Bouchard.

Goethel explained that because the VMS drains the batteries, he has to start his boat every day during the winter months and run it for about a half-hour. He said he cannot leave town without making arrangements for someone to start and run the boat daily.

Dave Marciano asked what happens if he has problems with his VMS unit.

“What if I have outages,” he asked. “Does this make me a target?”

Safety questions

Many fishermen had safety concerns and questions for committee members, US Coast Guard representatives, and VMS vendors regarding safety issues, which were especially keen in the light of the recent sinkings of the Lady of Grace and the Lady Luck with the loss of six lives.

Goethel wanted to know how the VMS information is shared with the Coast Guard.

“I would like to know when the Coast Guard knows the unit is not functioning,” Goethel said. “Especially in light of recent events that occurred, we need to know.”

Semrau answered that, while he knew the Coast Guard received data continuously, he couldn't speak to how it was used.

“We use VMS for enforcement,” he added. “We typically call the owner (if a vessel signal drops off) and try to determine what the situation is.”

Goethel observed that, when an EPIRB goes off, the Coast Guard calls the registered owner to determine if there's an emergency or if it's a false alarm. However, he didn't think there was such a protocol with VMS.

The panel acknowledged there was a need to address the protocol issue.

Goethel also asked the VMS vendors to provide the council with information on how ice build-up affects the VMS antenna transmission capabilities.

Panic buttons

Representatives of all three NMFS-approved VMS vendors attended the meeting and responded to fishermen's questions about the so-called panic or distress button.

The Boatracs unit can be used with a panic button, which costs about \$65 to set up, according to Debbie Foste, manager of fisheries and corporate services for Boatracs out of San Diego, CA. There is no monthly fee for the panic button, she added, and it polls your position once you hit it.

The Thrane and Thrane VMS has a distress button that comes with the VMS unit. The distress button cannot be uninstalled from the unit and you can have more than one button on the vessel, according to Charles Natoli of Thrane and Thrane.

Skymate does not currently have a distress button but, according to Product Manager Sally Beasley, the company is working on it and expects to make the feature available in April. Activating the distress feature will take a change in software but not in hardware, she said.

Rhode Island fisherman Phil Ruhle remained skeptical.

“Trying to find a key on a keyboard when the boat is going down is not going to happen. We need to start watching the reports,” he said.

His brother, Jimmy Ruhle, a North Carolina fisherman and member of the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, was also disturbed by the news on the VMS front.

“As a member of the Mid-Atlantic council, I will not advocate for

VMS in the fisheries the Mid-Atlantic is responsible for (squid, mackerel, butterfish, etc.)” he said. “VMS is supposed to be a two-way street, but it has not been. NMFS has to live up to its promises to make this work for the benefit of the industry.”

Rosanne Mizzoni

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