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Shrimping vessel may have cargo seized

A shrimping vessel found in the Oculina Bank was escorted to the U.S. Coast Guard station in Fort Pierce this afternoon and could have its rock shrimp cargo seized.

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Officials with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found the 77-foot boat, around 3 p.m. in the prohibited area after it was tracked by the agency's vessel monitoring system, according to the U.S. Coast Guard. Crewmembers from the Coast Guard Cutter Bluefin contacted the boat and the captain said he was carrying 10,000 pounds of rock shrimp.

Agents from NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service were investigating the incident Monday night and depending on what is found, there could be civil or criminal penalties. The shrimp, if seized by law enforcement, will be sold at fair market value, with proceeds going into an escrow account until the case is resolved, according to the Coast Guard.

Oculina Bank, located about 15 miles offshore from Fort Pierce and stretching north of Cocoa Beach, was designated a "Habitat Area of Particular Concern" in 1984 by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. The 92-square-kilometer area is closed to trawling, dredging, longlining and trapping and there are additional restrictions on possession of rock shrimp and Oculina, a type of coral, according to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

Addendum: John Reed was contacted by the Coast Guard to identify a large piece of coral that was found hidden in the smoke stacks of the shrimper vessel. Reed identified it as Oculina varicosa.