



Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

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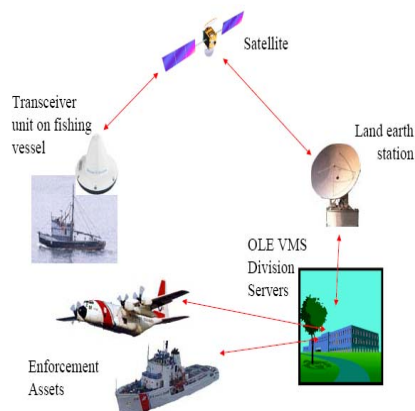


Frequently Asked Questions—VMS

Management measures for Gulf reef fish fisheries include several area specific regulations where reef fish fishing is restricted or prohibited. Unlike size, bag, and trip limits, where catch can be monitored onshore, area restrictions require at-sea enforcement.

VMS allows NOAA Fisheries Service Office for Law Enforcement (OLE) to monitor vessels over vast expanses of open-water while maintaining the confidentiality of fishing operations. VMS allows OLE to use modern-day technology to monitor compliance, track violations, and provide substantial evidence for prosecution, while maintaining the integrity of the individual fisherman's effort.

In addition, some VMS provide an optional safety mechanism with a 'panic button' that can be activated during a vessel emergency, and United States Coast Guard assets can be directed to the vessel's last known position.



What is VMS?

VMS is a satellite-based vessel-monitoring program. It consists of a mobile transceiver unit placed on the vessel, a communications service provider that supplies the wireless link between the unit on the vessel and the OLE, and a secure OLE facility where staff can monitor compliance.

Why is VMS needed?

VMS enhances enforcement of area restrictions. The Reef Fish FMP contains several area-specific regulations in which fishing is restricted or prohibited to protect habitat, protect spawning aggregations, or reduce fishing pressure. Unlike size, bag, and trip limits, where the catch can be monitored when a vessel returns to port, area restrictions require at-sea enforcement.

Who is required to have VMS onboard?

All commercially permitted reef fish vessels and charter vessels with commercial reef fish permits are required to have VMS. Reef fish vessels exclusively using fish traps are exempt because fish traps will no longer be an allowable gear type after February 7, 2007.

When will VMS become mandatory?

The effective date is December 7, 2006.

Who will pay for VMS?

The cost of the vessel equipment, installation, maintenance, and month-to-month communications will be paid or arranged for by the vessel owners. NOAA Fisheries Service will maintain and publish in the *Federal Register* a list of type-approved units and communications protocols. **NOTE: Federal money has been approved – click [here](#) for more information.**

When do I have to run the VMS?

The VMS must send a signal at least once an hour, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, throughout the year. The VMS system can be turned off under certain circumstances, in which case the vessel permit holder must apply for a power-down exemption.

When can I apply for a power-down exemption?

A vessel owner can apply for a power-down exemption from OLE if:

The vessel will be continuously out of the water for more than 72 consecutive hours, or;

Vessels fishing with both a valid commercial and for-hire reef fish permit can sign out of the VMS program for a minimum period of 1 calendar month. The vessel cannot conduct commercial fishing until the VMS is turned back on and OLE personnel verify consistent position reports.

Will the VMS send a signal only once per hour?

No. NOAA Fisheries Service will define buffer zones of one nautical mile around some restricted fishing areas. Once a vessel enters a defined buffer zone, the VMS reporting rate will increase to every 15 minutes at the vessel owner's expense. If the vessel departs the buffer zone and enters the restricted area, the VMS reporting rate increases to every 10 minutes until the vessel departs the restricted area and/or buffer zone.