

BOAT DOCUMENTATION

Most boat owners are familiar with the need to register their boat with their state's Department of Natural Resources or a similar state organization but many are confused about the need for and the process to document a boat.

Documentation of a boat is a national form of registry which, here in the United States, is handled by the United States Coast Guard. It has been doing this since 1789 when an Act of Congress created this system to foster interstate commerce. In the 20th century recreational vessels were allowed to document along with commercial and fishing vessels. Documentation is not required and there are fees to be paid. So why would you want to do this?

If you plan to cruise in foreign waters it will be helpful in dealing with foreign authorities. It becomes your "passport" for your boat. Those of us cruising on the Great Lakes will encounter foreign waters as we enter Canadian ports on all of the Great Lakes except Lake Michigan. The documentation numbers establish your boat's nationality and makes getting cruising permits easier. It also means you only having to clear customs in one port and it provides certain protection offered by the U.S. flag.

A second reason to document a vessel is to establish a clear title to the boat. Ownership of documented vessels is easier to trace through the United States Coast Guard Abstract of Title. This federal system provides a greater assurance of title over state registrations because of the USCG rigid standards in the paperwork procedures involved in the proof of ownership and transfer of titles.

If the vessel is new and has never been documented, ownership may be established by submission of a Builder's Certification naming the applicant for documentation as the person for whom the vessel was built or to whom the vessel was first transferred. This document is furnished by the boat's manufacturer. Also acceptable is a first assignment on a Manufacturer's Certificate of Origin, a copy of the State Registration or Title, or foreign registration showing that the applicant owns the vessel.

In the case of a previously owned vessel, the applicant must present bills of sale, or other evidence showing transfer of the vessel from the person who last documented, titled, or registered the vessel, or to whom the vessel was transferred on a Builder's Certification or Manufacturer's Certificate of Origin.

An additional and perhaps most important reason to document a vessel is because it is easier to obtain financing. Actually, most lending institutions will require USCG Documentation to allow them to record a Preferred Ship's Mortgage. This instrument provides the greatest protection for the lender because it is enforceable throughout the United States and some foreign countries. A preferred mortgage is a mortgage which is given status as a maritime lien. As such it enjoys a certain priority in the event of default. In addition, the Coast Guard is prohibited from making certain changes in documentation including, but not limited to, change of vessel ownership, name, and hailing port without consent of the mortgagee. If there is an outstanding mortgage, the mortgagee (lender) should complete a Satisfaction of Mortgage before the vessel is sold. The vessel cannot be removed from documentation with an outstanding mortgage.

Your boat is eligible for documentation if it has a net tonnage of five or more which is a minimum of 10,000 pounds. Net tonnage is a measure of a vessel's volume. It should not be confused with the vessel's weight, which may also be expressed in tons. Most vessels more than 25 feet in length will measure five net tonnage or more.

The National Vessel Documentation Center located in West Virginia is the United States Coast Guard's official agency where all papers are presented and kept on file. Its Mission Statement reads as follows. "The National Vessel Documentation Center facilitates maritime commerce and the availability of financing while protecting economic privileges of United States citizens through the enforcement of regulations, and provides a register of vessels available in time of war or emergency to defend and protect the United States of America." This doesn't mean that the government will confiscate private boats during wartime. Actually, the federal government can requisition any vessel at any time which has nothing to do with documentation.



A Certificate of Documentation

Once initial documentation is complete, a six or seven digit Official Number is issued to the vessel which must be permanently affixed to the structure of the hull and a Certificate of Documentation is issued to the owner(s). The official number assigned to documented vessels, must be marked in block-type Arabic numerals at least three inches high on some clearly visible interior structural part of the hull. The number must be permanently affixed so that alteration, removal, or replacement would be obvious and cause some scarring or damage to the surrounding hull area.



Example of documentation number permanently mounted on bulkhead

Documented vessels do not display their official numbers on the outside of the hull, but are identified by the name and hailing port. The application for documentation must include a name for the vessel composed of letters of the Latin alphabet or Arabic or Roman numerals and may not exceed 33 characters. The name may not be identical, actually or phonetically, to any word or words used to solicit assistance at sea; may not contain or be phonetically identical to obscene, indecent, or profane language, or to racial or ethnic epithets. Once established, a vessel's name may not be changed without application, fees, and the consent of the National Vessel Documentation Center. There is no rule against duplication of names for documented vessels, so hailing ports are helpful in identifying vessels.



Name and hailing port displayed on transom

The name and hailing port of a recreational vessel must be marked together on some clearly visible exterior part of the hull. All markings may be made by any means and materials that result in durable markings and must be at least four inches in height, made in clearly legible letters of the Latin alphabet or Arabic or Roman numerals. The "hailing port" must include both a place and a State or Territory possession of the United States. The state may be abbreviated.

Documentation eliminates the need for state registration numbers on the bow. But all documented vessels must comply with the laws of the state in which they are operated. The vessel's document must be shown to state law enforcement personnel upon their demand. States may require documented vessels to be registered (but not numbered) and to display state decals showing that they have complied with state requirements. In Wisconsin, these decals are displayed on the transom on both sides of the name & port. Documentation is not an exemption from paying state sales taxes and owners will be required to pay these when the boat is registered in the state where it will be located 6 months or more of a given year. There are 25 states that do not require documented boats to register but there may still be certain taxes to be paid.



State registration numbers displayed on bow

A Certificate of Documentation is valid for one year from the date of issue, providing there are no changes other than a change of owner's address. The Certificate must be renewed on an annual basis. Even though it is up to the owner to assure the document does not expire, the Coast Guard will send a Notice of Renewal to the managing owner approximately 45 days prior to expiration. There is no fee for the yearly renewal.

Documentation of your vessel does not cover the vessel's tender or dinghy. These craft fall within the jurisdiction of the motorboat numbering laws of the

state of principal use. You must contact your state agency that handles the registration or numbering of motorboats for further information.

A vessel may be deleted from documentation upon the request of the vessel owner or an authorized agent on behalf of the owner. The request must be in writing and is to include the vessel's official number. The original Certificate of Documentation (COD) is to be returned by the owner named on the certificate.

For more detailed information, the United States Coast Guard has a very thorough website. The forms required to apply for documentation are available on-line. There are private agencies that will do the documentation process for you but they will charge a fee for their service. If you finance a boat, the lending institution will do the paper work but they customarily add a fee as well. The paperwork must be presented exactly as required or the application may be rejected. For some, enlisting the services of a professional may save time and effort in the long run.

Ken and Karen Schuler
Trawlers Midwest Inc

Please direct any questions or comments you may have to:

Phone: 920-894-2632

Email: trawlers@trawlersmidwest.com