

Mexican vessel detained for fishing in exclusive U.S. waters

by Terry Rodgers

SAN DIEGO - The Coast Guard escorted a Mexican fishing boat to its headquarters near Shelter Island on Monday and detained the crew for allegedly poaching in U.S. waters off San Diego.

Such a seizure off the California coast is so rare that Coast Guard officials and federal fisheries agents couldn't remember the last time it occurred.

DETAINED - The 60-foot El Vencedor sat yesterday at the U.S. Coast Guard dock in San Diego Bay after being spotted in U.S. waters off San Diego's coast Sunday. Federal Agents haven't decided what to do with the vessel. CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis.

A Coast Guard cutter, the Sea Otter, was on routine patrol Sunday when it spotted the Mexican fishing boat, which was towing several miles of longline fishing gear.

Five Coast Guard sailors boarded the vessel without incident and found tons of shark meat and an unspecified number of shark fins. Longline fishing for shark is legal, but 19 species of the fish are protected under U.S. law, said Mark Oswell, a spokesman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, also known as the NOAA Fisheries Service.

The boat was about 11 miles inside a U.S. area called the Exclusive Economic Zone, which was established by presidential proclamation in 1983.

Monday morning, federal fisheries officials detained and questioned - but didn't arrest - the six crew members, all Mexican citizens. They didn't find any drugs on board.

The seized boat, the 60-foot El Vencedor, is registered to Naviera Puerto Nuevo, S.A. de C.V., a company based in Ensenada, Mexico. Documents found online indicate the company has fewer than 15 employees and does less than \$1 million in annual sales.

The six fishermen are being allowed to stay aboard their vessel, but at some point they will be released back to Mexico, the NOAA Fisheries Service said. The agency is conducting the investigation with help from the Coast Guard and the California Fish & Game Department.

Federal fisheries agents said they have not decided what to do with the vessel.

Authorities said the shark meat will be sold to a local seafood wholesaler and the proceeds will be put into a trust account until the case is settled in court.

So-called incursion incidents involving violations of the Exclusive Economic Zone are common along the Gulf Coast but unusual along the West Coast, Oswell said.

The few cases include one in 1986 when the Coast Guard detained 25 Mexican fishermen and forced them to dump their catch of sea urchins overboard, according to news reports. Strong winds had blown their fleet of eight pangas into U.S. waters just north of Playas de Tijuana.

The following year, a 60-foot boat based in Mazatlan was seized for fishing illegally in U.S. waters. The vessel was found in the Tanner Banks area, about 60 miles west of San Diego. It was carrying more than 1,000 pounds of fish.

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