

MDMR Office of Marine Patrol: Keeping Mississippi's Marine Resources Safe

Will Freeman

GUEST EXPERT

Background

The Mississippi Department of Marine Resources (MDMR) Office of Marine Patrol is Mississippi's leading maritime law enforcement authority. In 1994, the Mississippi Legislature officially established the MDMR and the Office of Marine Patrol to enhance, protect, and conserve Mississippi's delicate marine resources. The MDMR is the state's primary coastal enforcement agency, with the officers of the MDMR, better known as Marine Patrol officers, statutorily charged with enforcing conservation, boating safety, and all other criminal laws. Marine Patrol officers work for the citizens of Mississippi. The men and women of Marine Patrol put unparalleled effort into protecting maritime flora and fauna and providing the safest boating environment.

Organization

The Office of Marine Patrol consists of three divisions: Uniformed Patrol, Criminal Investigations, and Administrative. The Uniformed Patrol Division provides the overt daily presence and uniformed inspections and emergency response on Mississippi marine waters. This division consists of four separate shifts, providing 24 hours of law enforcement on and off the water.

The Criminal Investigations Division (CID) is responsible for investigating complex commercial fisheries violations, and boat accident investigations and reconstruction, requiring subject matter experts, and digital and cellular forensics analysis. CID officials serve as agency liaisons with local, state, and federal partners.

The MDMR maintains a cooperative enforcement agreement with the National Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of Law Enforcement

(NOAA OLE). As part of the agreement, Marine Patrol officers are granted federal inspection authority to stop, board, and inspect recreational and commercial fishing vessels outside Mississippi territorial waters.

The Office of Marine Patrol's uniformed patrol division is supported by the agency's Reserve Officer Program staffed by volunteers from the coastal community with special skills, including part-time law enforcement certification. They provide additional presence during special events, major boating weekends, and when other agencies call upon the MDMR for other support. The Marine Patrol Reserve Division also assists with public outreach projects and special events.

Boating Safety

Providing the safest boating environment for the public is one of the MDMR's most important mission areas. Boating enforcement takes place in local river systems, bays, the Mississippi Sound, and the Gulf of Mexico. With nearly 1,000 square miles of public waterways used by over 55,000 vessels (state- and federally- numbered), the Office of Marine Patrol employs a variety of patrol boats to meet the various mission needs. Marine Patrol officers routinely stop and inspect vessels for compliance with state and federal boating safety regulations. Some examples of safety equipment that an officer will inspect are life jackets, signaling devices, fire extinguishers, and sound producing devices. Marine Patrol officers also enforce the state statute prohibiting boating while under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. The officers are trained in the most current field sobriety testing methods and legal updates, and undergo an initial wet lab training followed by annual refresher training.



Marine Patrol officers participate in annual **Boating Under the Influence** refresher training.

Protection of Marine Resources

The Office of Marine Patrol uses its legal authority under 49 Miss. Code ch. 15 to inspect recreational and commercial harvesters, processing facilities, seafood retailers and wholesalers, and other entities selling marine resources products. Marine Patrol officers enforce state statutes and administrative regulations to safeguard the state's marine resources.

Joint Enforcement Agreement

In July 2001, the MDMR entered into a cooperative enforcement agreement with NOAA OLE to provide enforcement of federal regulations in state and federal waters. Through the agreement, Marine Patrol officers carry out regulatory inspections of recreational and commercial

fishing vessels in the economic exclusion zone, which extends from three miles seaward of the Mississippi barrier islands to 200 miles into the Gulf of Mexico. A normal patrol may include boarding and inspecting recreational reef fishing vessels, commercial longline vessels, and commercial shrimp trawlers – all in one day.

Saltwater Finfish

Aside from recreational boating, saltwater fishing is one of the most popular hobbies on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Recreational and commercial fishing make up a large portion of a Marine Patrol officer's resource enforcement efforts. Officers conduct both land and sea patrols to ensure compliance with state and federal regulations.

For example, Marine Patrol officers enforce the provisions of the Tails N' Scales program, a self-check harvest report program for the recreational catch of red snapper. Officers conduct regulatory inspections of trip declarations and harvest efforts as part of the Fishery Management Plan for Reef Fish Resources in the Gulf of Mexico.

The MDMR regulates the taking of popular marine finfish, such as the spotted seatrout, flounder, red drum, sheepshead and tripletail. Some of the illegal fishing activities Marine Patrol officers encounter include unlawful possession of undersized fish, possessing over the limit, fishing during a closed season, unlawful possession of filleted fish, and illegal monofilament gillnet fishing. Oftentimes, when Marine Patrol officers seize illegal fish found in good condition, the illegal catch is donated to non-profit groups, such as local food banks and homeless shelters.

Oysters

One of the most important harvestable marine species to monitor is the American oyster. The oyster provides employment opportunities for harvesters and processors and provides tasty table fare. Historically, oysters were harvested from public and private reefs in the western Mississippi Sound. Today, private, off-bottom aquaculture provides a greater opportunity for small businesses to offer oysters year-round. Marine Patrol officers patrol the public reefs and aquaculture leases to monitor harvest and ensure compliance with state and federal regulations. Marine Patrol officers provide a uniformed presence in all weather and sea conditions to ensure the public reefs are protected.



A Marine Patrol officer located undersized red snapper during a federal patrol.

Only under safe harvest and processing conditions can oysters be offered to the public for raw consumption. Marine Patrol officers routinely inspect certified processors and dealers for compliance with state and federal regulations governing the safe handling of raw oysters. On occasion, the Office of Marine Patrol partners with other state regulators to ensure that raw oysters served at restaurants are purchased from licensed and certified oyster harvesters and dealers.

Crabs

Blue Crabs provide year-round recreational enjoyment and commercial gain. The Mississippi Gulf Coast has one of the healthiest crab stocks found in the northern gulf. As part of their resource enforcement duties, Marine Patrol officers routinely inspect both recreational and commercial crab harvesters for compliance with gear and possession laws and regulations. In Mississippi, the harvest of an egg-bearing crab, also known as a sponge crab, is prohibited.



Credit: MDMR Office of Marine Patrol

A Marine Patrol officer seized 214 egg-bearing female crabs from a non-resident commercial crab fisherman. Due to the egregiousness of the violation, the court chose to charge the violator one count for each crab, totaling \$107,000 in potential fines. All the crabs were returned to the marine waters.

Marine Patrol officers work diligently to identify and apprehend those intentionally taking sponge crabs.

Another problem associated with crab fishing is derelict traps. These are the lost, damaged, or forgotten crab traps. Not only do they create an environmental risk, but they also pose a risk to boats, catching in propellers. Shrimpers sometimes find their nets ripped open by the derelict traps.

Shrimp

Saltwater shrimp are another regulated marine species governed by state and federal regulations. Marine Patrol officers are authorized to inspect shrimp harvesters for licenses, gear, and location of harvest. A regulatory compliance inspection may include measuring the size of the shrimp trawl (net) or its otter doors, and inspecting other species onboard. Under the federal enforcement agreement, Marine Patrol officers also check shrimpers for compliance with federal regulations, such as compliance with the use of turtle excluder devices, better known as TEDs, which allow sea turtles to escape from the nets. Sea turtles are protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), and ESA regulations require shrimp trawlers to use mitigation gear to reduce incidental catches of sea turtles. An average inspection of a shrimp trawler with four nets will take a Marine Patrol officer over one hour to complete. In some cases, an inspection of a single trawler in violation could consume an entire patrol day.

Marine Patrol officers inspect harvest vessels and bait camps to ensure compliance with regulations pertaining to bait shrimp. Live bait operators are allowed to harvest shrimp year-round to support Mississippi recreational fishermen. Officers patrol the marine waters to ensure shrimp harvesters are avoiding estuarine areas critical to the successful growing of saltwater shrimp. The Mississippi recreational and commercial shrimp season opens in late spring or early summer, depending on the shrimp count. Commercial live bait harvested from Mississippi waters is prohibited from leaving the state.

Coastal Wetlands and Derelict Vessels

The MDMR is statutorily charged with the protection of Mississippi's coastal wetlands. Through an interagency partnership with the MDMR's Office of Coastal Zone Management, Marine Patrol officers inspect for the appropriate permits for all construction within the coastal management zone. In addition to regulatory inspections, officers respond and document reports of damaged wetlands and environmental concerns.

The Office of Marine Patrol assists the Derelict Vessel Removal Program with identifying vessels that could potentially create navigational and/or environmental hazards. Marine Patrol officers provide field reports, affix notices to vessels, and assist in identifying the responsible party for removal.



A derelict vessel located along the marine waters of Harrison County, Miss.

Specialized Units and Capabilities

Criminal Investigations Division

In 2014, the MDMR established a full-time criminal investigations division (CID) consisting of a supervisor and four field investigators. The primary focus of the CID is to support the Uniformed Patrol Division with investigating complex marine resources crimes, investigate boating accidents involving serious bodily injuries or deaths, assisting the MDMR with employment background checks, and serving as agency internal affairs. CID investigators receive special training in criminal investigations, collision analysis, digital forensics. CID staff also serve as agency liaisons with state and federal task forces.

Homeland Security, Including Search and Rescue Team and Dive Team

In 2018, the MDMR was awarded its first FEMA Port Security Program Grant to bolster maritime security of



The Office of Marine Patrol partnered with the U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard to provide 24/7 protection of the USS Cincinnati (LCS-20) during her commissioning at the Port of Gulfport in 2019.

Mississippi's ports, waterside attractions, passenger ferries, and other critical infrastructure. The MDMR has received nearly \$2 million in federal funding to increase maritime domain awareness and response capabilities to each of Mississippi ports: Port Bienville, Port of Gulfport, and Port of Pascagoula. Recently, the Port of Gulfport was designated as a strategic military port, allowing the U.S. Department of Defense to use it for military outloads. The Office of Marine Patrol is an active member of the Area Maritime Security Subcommittees for each port area and participates in state and federal training exercises to increase response to critical maritime incidences.



In 2022, Marine Patrol officers and the Mississippi Office of Homeland Security conducted an underwater improvised explosive device training exercise in the Port of Gulfport.

The MDMR also assists through the deployment of its search and rescue team and dive team. The search and rescue team is trained for inland and overland search and rescue. The team is also capable of deploying into flooded zones for small boat rescue missions. Marine Patrol divers are called upon by local partnering agencies in cases of drownings to recover evidence and victims, executing these missions with precision and excellence. Additionally, Marine Patrol divers train regularly in the detection of underwater and parasitic devices that threaten our homeland security. ↗

Captain Will Freeman is at the Office of Marine Patrol, Mississippi Department of Marine Resource.