

May 3, 2000

Mr. John Walker, Chief  
Bureau of Marine Enforcement  
Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission  
620 South Meridian Street  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1600

Good Morning Chief:

Nice talking to you this morning. As I mentioned, the cash sales of saltwater products to restaurants and other customers who wish to buy on the black market is rampant throughout Florida. According to the amendment to Senate Bill 806 passed by the Senate and House this week, (copy following) both the purchase of saltwater products from an unlicensed person, firm or corporation or the sale of saltwater products by an unlicensed person, firm or corporation is a major violation and subject a civil fine of up to \$2500 and wholesale and retail license privileges can be suspended for up to 90 days. That's good news.

Aside from the fact these poachers are dealing in cash transactions to avoid their fair share of taxes for support of government, they are undermining the legitimate dealers and processors who must adhere to a book full of state and federal regulations. They can be selling saltwater products in Florida that are harmful to consumers. No taxes, No trip tickets, No Safety requirements. That's bad news.

In the Mayport area this past month, there was one instance related to me of a person filing a trip ticket for 1100 pounds of cobia. I think the limit on cobia is 2 per person so that boat would have had a crew of 550 fishermen on it if the 2 fish limit is the law. A cursory plain clothed observation process by FWC around public boat ramps could uncover thousands of pounds of grouper and other reef fish that have had their heads blown off and brought in for sale. So called "sports fishermen" seem to be quite involved in this activity. This is poaching activity that should be highlighted in the Wildlife Alert System the old Game and Fish agency had for years. I assume the Wildlife Alert is aimed at anyone violating the law and not just commercial fishermen.

John, I write this letter as we are on the verge of contacting every state & federal agency we can, including the IRS and Department of Justice, to address this inequity. We are especially concerned that under federal law, 21CFR, Parts 123 & 1240, ALL fishery products, freshwater or saltwater, must go through a HACCP certified facility before being sold on the US market.

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Many of our plants had to spend thousands of dollars in order to meet federal regulations in order to be able to sell grouper to seafood restaurants, but a poacher can go through the back door and either sell the grouper for cash or trade it out in free meals. Either way these poachers are stealing from you and me and all the other people in Florida.

Let me emphasize, I know how difficult it is to catch this type of poacher. A man with a net on his boat can't hide, but a man with undersized and over the limit grouper and snapper can be in any boat being brought up on a trailer or parked in a slip. I also know sting operations are costly and time consuming but as long as we operate under the rule of law, we must level the playing field.

It occurs to me with this new language concerning the buying and selling from unlicensed persons, it could serve as a catalyst to inform the public of what is going on and that the FWC intends to prosecute anyone caught poaching to the limits of the law. Such an announcement might deter those poachers who are marginal. The hard core bang stickers are just going to have to be caught and punished one at a time as far as I can tell.

I'm not going to mention any particular SFA members in this letter as I don't want any unnecessary heat put on them in the event one of the FMP officers might inadvertently put something on the waterfront that "so and so" is behind the increased law enforcement. Over the past 37 years this has happened a time or two and I had rather take the heat for more stringent law enforcement than my members.

If you have the time, we would like to have you visit with our Board of Directors in Key West during our annual meeting, which will be held June 8-10. The Board Meeting is at 3:00 PM on June 8<sup>th</sup> at the Holiday Inn Beachside. We would be honored by your presence.

I look forward to working with you to reduce the number of poachers in the state and to assure that all saltwater products sold on the Florida market are legally harvested have been processed under state and federal HACCP regulations.

Sincerely yours,

Bob Jones

Cc: SFA Membership