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## Derelict Vessels in Florida Waterways

Derelict vessels are a big problem in Florida, but what exactly is a derelict vessel and who is responsible for them? Derelict vessels are vessels that have been abandoned and allowed to deteriorate in public waters. Besides being eyesores, derelict vessels can pose environmental, public safety and navigation hazards. They are hazardous to the environment because they leak fluids, such as oil and gas, and debris from the vessel ends up in the water. They become public safety and navigation hazards when other vessels are not able to see them at night or they become submerged under the water.

There are a number of reasons, including financial, that result in a vessel becoming derelict. Increases in marine fees and increases in foreclosure rates at all income levels are some reasons. Other reasons include an inability to purchase a better quality vessel in the first place (fixer uppers), increased visibility of vessel conditions due to anchoring issues, lack of vessel owner education and ownership requirements, and lack of judicial based punitive action (which is slowly getting better). All of these derelict vessels are managed through the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) website.

State, County, and Local Law Enforcement generally keep an eye out for abandoned vessels that could be "at-risk" of becoming derelict. The FWC considers a vessel to be "at-risk" when it appears likely to reach a derelict condition and causes an officer to have concern for its welfare. FWC launched a program in 2010 to help prevent vessels in state waterways from becoming derelict. Through this At-Risk Vessel Program, FWC officers will collaborate with local law enforcement offices to enter information about potential derelict vessels into a statewide database. When an officer encounters an at-risk vessel, the officer will post a notice on the vessel, listing the items of concern, then collect information about the vessel and enter it into a statewide database. A letter will also be mailed to the registered owner. Photographs and information about the vessel will be displayed on a map that is available for the public to view at <https://public.myfwc.com/LE/ArrestNet/DerelictVessel/VesselMap.aspx>.



Derelict vessel. Photo courtesy of MyFWCmedia

Derelict vessels are subject to removal at the owner's expense. When ownership is determined, legal custody of the vessel must be transferred to a responsible party for removal. Some owners are willing to sign over the title, saving both time and money. If the owner does not remove the vessel, the owner may be charged with a felony, lose vehicle and vessel registration privileges, incur other legal and court costs or be forced to reimburse the city, county or state for the cost of the removal (depending on the

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circumstances). If the owner of the vessel cannot be determined or located then the cost of removing the vessel either falls on Florida taxpayers or on the local municipality/county involved (sometimes with the help of grants). It's important to note that both the seller and the buyer of a vessel are required by law to report the sale to the Department of Highway Safety and Motor vehicles within 30 days after the transaction. If the title isn't transferred and re-registration isn't done properly then the former owner could be responsible for the vessel if it becomes derelict.

For more information about FWC's Florida At-Risk Vessel Program and derelict vessel removal effort visit <http://myfwc.com/boating/waterway/derelict-vessels>.