



Marine Safety Information Bulletin

U.S. Coast Guard
Sector Upper Mississippi River
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Illegal Charter Operations on Lake of the Ozarks

PURPOSE: This bulletin warns the public of significant safety risks from illegal charter vessels on the Lake of the Ozarks. These operators violate U.S. Code and face substantial fines, and this guide provides clear steps to identify and report these dangerous operations

BACKGROUND: The U.S. Coast Guard and law enforcement partners are increasing enforcement to combat the rise of illegal charters. These illegal operators present a serious public safety threat as they often use:

- **Unlicensed Captains:** Operators may be uncertified, inexperienced, or unfamiliar with safety rules.
- **Missing Safety Gear:** Vessels often lack required equipment like life jackets and fire extinguishers.
- **Ignores Regulations:** They frequently violate laws on passenger limits, operating hours, and navigation.
- **No Drug & Alcohol Testing:** Crews are often not enrolled in federally required testing programs.

VERIFYING A LEGAL CHARTER: Always confirm credentials—Captains need a valid Coast Guard-issued Merchant Mariner Credential (MMC); vessels with seven or more passengers must also have a Coast Guard-issued Certificate of Inspection (COI) visibly displayed on the vessel. A significantly lower price than other competitors is a common red flag.

PENALTIES FOR ILLEGAL OPERATIONS: Owners and operators of illegal charters face severe federal civil and, potentially, criminal penalties, including:

- \$5,996 each day for operating a vessel without a Coast Guard Certificate of Inspection for vessels carrying more than six passengers. (46 U.S.C § 3318(j)(1))
- \$49,848 per day for failure of an inspected vessel to be under the control of an individual with an appropriate Coast Guard credential. (46 U.S.C. § 8906)
- \$49,848 for failure to have an uninspected passenger vessel under the control of a properly licensed individual. (46 U.S.C. § 8906)
- \$9,624 for failure of operators to be enrolled in a chemical testing program. (46 U.S.C. § 2115)
- \$20,468 for failure to produce a valid Certificate of Documentation for vessels over 5 gross tons. (46 U.S.C. § 12151(a)(1))

REPORT SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY: Help keep the lake safe by reporting suspected illegal charters to the Coast Guard.

What to include: Name of operator (if known); photos; vessel name & description; date, location, and number of passengers.

- Phone: 1 (866) 360-3386 **24/7 availability**
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