

U.S. Department of
Homeland Security



United States
Coast Guard

National Vessel Documentation Center

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WHAT IS VESSEL DOCUMENTATION?

Vessel documentation is a national form of registration. It is one of the oldest functions of Government, dating back to the 11th Act of the First Congress. Documentation provides conclusive evidence of nationality for international purposes, provides for unhindered commerce between the states, and admits vessels to certain restricted trades, such as coastwise trade and the fisheries. Since 1920, vessel financing has been enhanced through the availability of preferred mortgages on

documented vessels.

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WHAT VESSELS MAY BE DOCUMENTED?

A vessel must measure at least five net tons and, with the exception of certain oil spill response vessels, must be wholly owned by a citizen of the U.S.

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MUST MY VESSEL BE DOCUMENTED?

Vessels of five net tons or more used in fishing activities on navigable waters of the U.S. or in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), or used in coastwise trade must be documented unless the vessel is exempt from documentation. Coastwise trade is generally defined as the transportation of merchandise or passengers between points in the U.S. or the EEZ. In addition, towboats operating between points in the U.S. or the EEZ or between the EEZ and points in the U.S. and dredges operating in the U.S. or the EEZ must be documented.

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HOW DO I KNOW IF MY VESSEL MEASURES FIVE NET TONS?

Net tonnage is a measure of a vessel's volume. It should not be confused with the vessel's weight, which may also be expressed in tons. Most vessels more than 25 feet in length will measure five net tons or more. For information about how tonnage is determined, including a web-based interactive form that calculates tonnages, visit the U.S. Coast Guard Marine Safety Center's web site at the [Marine Safety Center's Tonnage Page](#).

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WHAT VESSELS ARE EXEMPT?

Vessels that do not operate on the navigable waters of the U.S. or in the fisheries in the EEZ, are exempt from the requirement to be documented. Also exempt are Coastwise qualified, non-self-propelled vessels used in coastwise trade within a harbor, on the rivers or lakes (except the Great Lakes) of the U.S. or the internal waters or canal of any state.

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ARE THERE DIFFERENT TYPES OF DOCUMENTATION?

Yes. A Certificate of Documentation may be endorsed for fishery, coastwise, registry, or recreation. Any documented vessel may be used for recreational purposes, regardless of its endorsement, but a vessel documented with a recreational endorsement only may not be used for any other purpose. Registry endorsements are generally used for foreign trade.

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WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR DOCUMENTATION?

The basic requirements for documentation are to demonstrate ownership of the vessel, U.S.

citizenship, and eligibility for the endorsement sought.

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HOW IS VESSEL OWNERSHIP ESTABLISHED?

If the vessel is new and has never been documented, ownership may be established by submission of a Builder's Certification (Form CG-1261), naming the applicant for documentation as the person for whom the vessel was built or to whom the vessel was first transferred. Also acceptable are a transfer on a Manufacturer's Certificate of Origin, a copy of the State Registration or Title, or foreign registration showing that the applicant owns the vessel.

In the case of a previously owned vessel, the applicant must present bills of sale, or other evidence showing transfer of the vessel from the person who last documented, titled, or registered the vessel, or to whom the vessel was transferred on a Builder's Certification or Manufacturer's Certificate of Origin. If title was transferred by some means other than a bill of sale, contact the NVDC for assistance.

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HOW DO I ESTABLISH U.S. CITIZENSHIP?

Citizenship is established by completion of form CG-1258. In addition to individuals, corporations, partnerships, and other entities capable of holding legal title may be deemed citizens for documentation purposes. Corporations must be registered in a state or the U.S; the chief executive officer and chairman of the board of directors must be U.S. citizens, and no more than a minority of the number of directors necessary to constitute a quorum may be non-citizens. In addition, at least 75% of the stock must be vested in U.S. citizens for a coastwise or fisheries endorsement.

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WHY AND HOW IS BUILD EVIDENCE ESTABLISHED?

Evidence that a vessel was built in the U.S. is required for a vessel which is to be used in the fisheries or coastwise trade. Build evidence is normally established by submitting a Builder's Certification on form CG-1261. That form must be completed by the person who constructed or oversaw the construction of the vessel or an official of the company that built the vessel who has examined the records of the company to determine the facts of build.

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WHAT ARE THE VESSEL NAME AND HAILING PORT MARKING REQUIREMENTS?

Documented vessels do not display their official numbers on the outside of the hull, but are identified by the name and hailing port. The application for documentation must include a name for the vessel composed of letters of the Latin alphabet or Arabic or Roman numerals and may not exceed 33 characters. The name may not be identical, actually or phonetically, to any word or words used to solicit assistance at sea; may not contain or be phonetically identical to obscene, indecent, or profane language, or to racial or ethnic epithets. Once established, a vessel's name may not be changed without application, fees, and the consent of the Director, National Vessel Documentation Center. There is no rule against duplication of names for documented vessels, so hailing ports are helpful in identifying vessels.

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HOW DO I MARK MY VESSEL?

The official number assigned to documented vessels, preceded of the abbreviation "NO." must be marked in block-type Arabic numerals at least three inches high on some clearly visible interior structural part of the hull. The number must be permanently affixed so that alteration, removal, or replacement would be obvious and cause some scarring or damage to the surrounding hull area.

The name and hailing port of a recreational vessel must be marked together on some clearly visible exterior part of the hull. The vessel name of a commercial vessel must also be marked on the port and starboard bow and the vessel name and the hailing port must also be marked on the stern. All markings may be made by any means and materials that result in durable markings and must be at least four inches in height, made in clearly legible letters of the Latin alphabet or Arabic or Roman numerals. The "hailing port" must include both a place and a State, Territory, or possession of in the United States. The state may be abbreviated.

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HOW DO I CHANGE THE NAME OR HAILING PORT OF MY VESSEL?

The name and/or hailing port may be changed by filing an application for change on form CG-1258 with the appropriate fees. If your vessel is subject to a mortgage of record, you must obtain permission from the mortgagee on form CG-4593.

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WHY DOES THE COAST GUARD REQUIRE DESIGNATION OF A MANAGING OWNER?

Many vessels have more than one owner. To make sure that the right person gets mail concerning the vessel, one must be designated as the managing owner.

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WHAT IS A PREFERRED MORTGAGE?

A preferred mortgage is a mortgage which is given status as a maritime lien. As such it enjoys a certain priority in the event of default. In addition, the Coast Guard is prohibited from making certain changes in documentation including, but not limited to, change of vessel ownership, name, and hailing port without consent of the mortgagee. For this reason many financial institutions require vessels which are eligible for documentation to be documented and to have preferred mortgages recorded against them.

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WHERE CAN I GET FORMS FOR DOCUMENTATION?

Documentation forms may be downloaded from the world wide web at [Forms Home Page](#), by telephoning the NVDC, pressing 5 on the first menu and following the instructions for the autofax system or leaving an address to which the forms may be mailed.

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MUST I SUBMIT MY APPLICATION BY MAIL?

In most instances you may submit your application by fax or as a .pdf attachment to e-mail, provided you pay your fees with a major credit card. This includes applications accompanied by bills of sale, mortgages, and satisfactions of mortgage. Among the exceptions are cases where an original is required, such as a builder's certification, a certified copy of a court order, certificate of merger or similar instrument is required.

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HOW DO I OBTAIN TITLE INFORMATION FOR A DOCUMENTED VESSEL?

You may obtain an Abstract of Title which will show all bills of sale, mortgages, and notices of claim of lien filed and recorded by the Coast Guard. You may request the Abstract by fax if you pay by credit card or may mail your request with the appropriate fee to the NVDC. To get accurate information you must supply the name and official number of the vessel.

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IS A DOCUMENTED VESSEL EXEMPT FROM STATE JURISDICTION?

No, all documented vessels must comply with the laws of the state in which they are operated. The vessel's document must be shown to state law enforcement personnel upon their demand. States may require documented vessels to be registered (but not numbered) and to display state decals showing that they have complied with state requirements.

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IS THE VESSEL TENDER DOCUMENTED?

Documentation of your vessel does not cover the vessel's tender or dinghy. These craft fall within the jurisdiction of the motorboat numbering laws of the state of principal use. Please contact your state agency that handles the registration or numbering of motorboats for further information

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I SELL MY DOCUMENTED VESSEL?

When the sale is finalized you may complete a U.S. Coast Guard Bill of Sale (CG-1340) or complete the "Sale or Transfer of Vessel" section on the reverse of the Certificate of Documentation (CG-1270). Documentation forms, fee schedules, and instructions are available for downloading on this web site. If there is an outstanding mortgage, the mortgagee (lender) should complete a Satisfaction of Mortgage. The vessel cannot be removed from documentation with an outstanding mortgage.

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HOW LONG IS THE CERTIFICATE OF DOCUMENTATION GOOD?

A Certificate of Documentation is valid for one year from the date of issue, providing there are NO

CHANGES other than a change of owner's address. The Certificate must be renewed on an annual basis. Even though it is up to the owner to assure the document does not expire, the Coast Guard will send a Notice of Renewal to the managing owner approximately 45 days prior to expiration. There is no fee for the yearly renewal. See the instruction letter Renewal of Certificate of Documentation elsewhere at this site regarding renewal procedures.

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MAY I RENEW A LOST CERTIFICATE OF DOCUMENTATION?

NO. An Application for Replacement (CG-1258) must be filed along with a \$50.00 fee. If the lost document has already expired it must be exchanged. The fee would then be \$84.00 plus applicable endorsement fees.

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SHOULD I RETURN THE CERTIFICATE OF DOCUMENTATION WITH THE RENEWAL NOTICE?

NO, simply sign, date and return the Renewal Notice even if your address has changed. Please note the address change. You will receive a new certificate that shows your new address.

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MAY I RENEW MY DOCUMENT EARLY?

YES. The Renewal form is available at this website. It may be downloaded from the Forms Menu. It may be mailed or faxed to (304)-271-2405. BE SURE TO CITE THE VESSEL'S OFFICIAL NUMBER.

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MAY I RENEW THE CERTIFICATE AFTER THE OWNERSHIP CHANGES?

NO. Ownership changes require that the Certificate be exchanged and accompanied by an Application (CG-1258), fees and other submissions to support the changes.

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HOW DO I DELETE A VESSEL FROM DOCUMENTATION?

A vessel may be deleted from documentation upon the request of the vessel owner or an authorized agent on behalf of the owner. The request must be in writing and is to include the vessel's official number. The original Certificate of Documentation (COD) is to be returned by the owner named on the certificate.

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HOW DO I REQUEST PRIORITY HANDLING?

See Instructions Page on our website for details.

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WHERE MAY I OBTAIN INFORMATION ON DOCUMENTED VESSELS?

The "Merchant Vessels of the United States" (CG 408) lists the names of U.S. merchant and recreational vessels documented under the laws of the United States. It provides vessel dimensions, tonnage, build (if available), and ownership information. The last printed version was in 1994. This information is now available in an electronic format (CD ROM) through National Technical Information Services (NTIS), 5285 Port Royal Road, Springfield, VA 22161. You can order the latest edition of Vol. 99-001 at a cost of \$125.00 plus shipping and handling. Contact Single Issue Sales at: 800-553-6847 or you can place your order electronically at: <http://WWW.NTIS.GOV> and search for "Merchant Vessels of the United States".

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HOW DO I GET A COASTWISE WAIVER FOR A SMALL PASSENGER VESSEL?

The Maritime Administration grants small passenger vessel waivers for operation in the coastwise trade. For further information, please go to [Maritime Administration Small Vessel Waiver Program](#) or contact Joann Spittle at (202) 366-5979.

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HOW DO I GET VESSEL DOCUMENTATION REGULATIONS?

Printed copies of all the regulations may be obtained via the internet from the U.S. government bookstore at: <http://bookstore.gpo.gov> or by calling (202) 512-1800 between 7:30 am and 4:30 pm EST or fax at (202) 512-2250. You may also receive printed copies by writing to:

Superintendent of Documents
P.O. Box 371954
Pittsburgh, PA 15250-7954

Title 46 CFR part 67 (Vessel Documentation regulations) may be found in text and PDF formats on the web at: www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx_01/46cfr67_01.html.

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The information provided in this pamphlet is for general guidance only and is not an exhaustive treatment of vessel documentation requirements. For specific questions, please contact the National Vessel Documentation Center.

Although most transactions require submission of processing fees, specific fee information is not provided in this pamphlet because fees are subject to change.

Thank you for visiting the NVDC.