



National Vessel Documentation Center

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: GENERAL INFORMATION

Updated 10/2025

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.

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.

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.

Are there different types of documentation?

Yes. A Certificate of Documentation (COD) may be endorsed for fishery, coastwise, registry, or recreation. Unless the COD currently restricts the vessel from recreational use, any documented vessel may be used for recreational purposes, regardless of its endorsement, but a vessel documented with only a recreational endorsement may not be used for any other purpose. Registry endorsements are generally used for foreign trade. Owners of commercial vessels less than 79 feet in overall length may find more information here: [Marine Safety Center Tonnage Division](#).

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. 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.

How do I notify you of my change of address and who may submit a change of address request for the COD?

To change your address, log in to [eStorefront](#) and use the "I need to change my address" button OR change your address when renewing your COD.

Only the Managing Owner of the vessel may authorize a request for a change of address. There is no charge for change of address.

46 CFR 67.113(e): "Whenever the address of the managing owner changes, the managing owner shall notify the Director, National Vessel Documentation Center within 10 days."

Third party requests for address changes must be accompanied by written authorization from the managing owner.

How do I obtain vessel documentation regulations?

[Title 46 CFR part 67](#) (Vessel Documentation regulations) may be found in text and PDF formats on the web.

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 at: United States Coast Guard Homeport, search for "Merchant Vessels of the United States" and choose the desired format.

Where can I get [Instructions and Forms](#) for documenting my vessel?

<https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Assistant-Commandant-for-Prevention-Policy-CG-5P/Inspections-Compliance-CG-5PC-/National-Vessel-Documentation-Center/Instructions-and-Forms/>

How do I order products online?

Visit [eStorefront](#) to securely order NVDC products.