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Area guides seek help against out-of-town fishermen

By Timothy O'Hara Key West Citizen

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The Lower Keys Guides Association is requesting new county regulations to better protect local fishing guides such as Justin Rea, above, and to help keep revenue from guiding and all charter fishing in the Florida Keys. The association wants to require nonresidents to have occupational licenses and pay sales tax when working in Monroe County. (ROB O'NEAL/The Citizen)

The Lower Keys Guides Association is requesting Monroe County officials strengthen its occupational and business licensing practices to crack down on out-of-county guides and charter fishermen who come to the Florida Keys seasonally and do not pay taxes or contribute to the local economy.

Two representatives with the Guides Association briefly addressed the Monroe County Commission at its monthly meeting last week. The representatives spoke primarily to request permission to give a formal presentation to the commission and make the commissioners aware of the issue, they said.

The Guides Association wants the county to tighten its regulations and enforcement of occupational licenses for all charter fishermen to keep out-of-town fishermen and businesses from renting homes and booking fishing trips and not local occupational licenses and not paying all of the local taxes.

Guides Association member Doug Kilpatrick contended that not only is the county losing out on revenue for required taxes and fees, but the customers are not eating at local restaurants or patronizing local businesses.

“We are seeing about a 30 to 40 percent influx of out-of-county guides in season. They basically take the money with them at the end of season and leave. They don’t pay taxes and they are not part of our community. We would like to see the commission recognize that there is a problem.”

In one case, an out-of-town company is renting homes with chefs and ferrying customers out to large fishing yachts off shore, without contributing much to the local economy. That out-of-county company is charging \$2,200 a day and running a fleet of six boats.

Kilpatrick called on the county to charge more for occupational licenses for out-of-county guides and charter fishing companies, which could come back to the local economy.

The Guides Association also wants the county to help commission a study to determine the financial impacts of both back country and offshore charter fishing in the Keys, group member Will Benson said.

A similar economic study, commissioned by Bonefish and Tarpon Trust several years ago, found that flats fishing in the Keys had a direct economic impact of \$249 million.

The revenue figure increased to \$427 million after factoring in fishermen’s expenses and how their earnings trickle down in the local economy, said Tony Fedler, who conducted the study.

The Guides Association wants the study to be expanded to all forms of charter and recreational fishing, Benson said.

“It’s clearly in the county’s best interest to have an understanding of the economic engine that runs this county,” Benson said.

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