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Press Release

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Swift Conviction for Shrimp Poaching

May 17, 2024 was opening day for shrimp season and the Department of Fish and Wildlife ("DFW") were out in full force protecting the State's natural resources. According to court records, DFW Sergeants Chris Zuchlewski, and Ken Balazs, along with DFW Officers Peter Messbarger, and Nicholas Parkert, were on patrol on the Hood Canal near Brinnon, Washington.

At that same time Lowell Griffin and Steven Smith, were attending a party with about twenty other people. The party took place on the beach at the Defendant, Curtis Grout's property. Witnesses reported that early in the day, Grout and two friends pulled three shrimp pots out of the water, cheered, then headed towards shore without conducting a count of their catch. The witnesses thought the catch was so successful that they moved their boat to where Grout had been shrimping.

Later that day, near the close of shrimping, Grout was out again but this time undercover DFW officers were present as well. The two UC officers observed Smith, Lowell, and Grout pull three pots out of the water. The pots contained far more shrimp than the three daily limits the men were allowed to take. The three men cheered over the size of their catch, then headed towards the shore without conducting a count. The officers radioed to a marked DFW patrol boat and told them to stop Grout's boat.

Sergeants Zuchlewski and Balazs turned and followed the boat which was crossing perpendicular in front of them. As they pulled alongside Grout's speeding boat, the Sergeants observed Grout throwing shrimp overboard while Griffin was driving the boat. The DFW officers ordered Grout to stop throwing shrimp and ordered Griffin to stop the boat. Griffin eventually stopped approximately 100 yards from the shore.

With the boats side by side, the DFW officers conducted an inspection of licenses, safety gear, and catch. Curtis and Lowell provided shrimp licenses, but Smith had left his on shore. Sgt. Zuchlewski testified that the daily limit of shrimp is 80 per license, which is approximately two, one-gallon Ziploc bags. Inside the boat, Sgt. Zuchlewski saw a large basket that was almost

full of shrimp and far exceeded the daily limit for the three men. Sgt. Zuchlewski asked Grout to hand over the basket, but Grout refused. Sgt. Zuchlewski then reached into Grout's boat and grabbed the basket so that the catch could be counted.

DFW Officer Peter Messbarger, who was conducting his first shrimp investigation, counted 680 shrimp in the basket. The daily limit for the three men was 240 shrimp, and so the Defendants were 440 shrimp over the limit. Messbarger testified that you cannot control how many shrimp that you get in a pot while it is in the water, but it is what you do with them once they are on the boat that matters.

After issuing the three Defendants criminal citations, the DFW officers pushed away and ended their contact with Grout and his associates.

Grout was charged with possession of twice the daily limit of shellfish in violation of RCW 77.15.370. At trial, Griffin testified that Grout had gone out and dropped his pots twice on the day in question. Griffin also testified that when they pulled their pots the second time, Grout was showing signs of low blood sugar, and so they pulled the pots into the boat, took a picture of their full shrimp pot, then headed to shore without counting so that they could be closer to shore if Grout had a diabetic incident. Griffin also testified that if it had been a medical emergency, they would have dumped the shrimp and headed to shore. Sgt. Zuchlewski testified he did not see any signs of a medical emergency, but ten minutes into the contact, Grout stated he needed some food due to low blood sugar, and so the officers allowed him to go to shore since they did not have anything they could give him.

After a two-day trial in Jefferson County District Court, and approximately 30 minutes of deliberation, the jury found Grout guilty as charged.

March 10, 2025, the parties appeared in court for sentencing. The State argued Grout formerly had a commercial license, he had been subject to multiple license violations, he had pending felony charges for trafficking in wildlife, and therefore he knew the shrimping rules and intentionally broke them. Because of this history, the State asked for 30 days in jail with 334 days suspended for 24 months. Defense counsel argued that his client had no prior fishing convictions, it had all been his employees committing the violations, and therefore the 30-day sentence was inappropriate for a first-time offender.

The Honorable Mindy Walker sentenced the Defendant to 30-days of electronic home monitoring, but stayed the EHM pending appeal. The rest of the sentence went into effect immediately.

"Poaching undermines the entire system we have to prevent over-exploitation of natural resources," said Deputy Prosecutor Chris Ashcraft. "It disrupts ecosystems, threatens sustainability, and robs future generations of food and recreation. The law's there for a reason, and doubling down on this violation is doubly indefensible."