

By Lucy Chabot Reed

Those days of U.S. customs officials sometimes stopping yacht crew for having the "wrong" visa (even though they have the correct one) may be coming to an end.

At a marine industry summit at the boat show yesterday, U.S. Congressman Allen West, who represents South Florida in Washington D.C., called on groups and leaders to create what they call in the military an After Action Report (AAR) when the show is over that points out the hurdles the yachting industry is dealing with. Then to sent it him so he can endorse it and send it to the pertinent federal agencies so the issues can be addressed.

"For whatever reason, people respond when they get a letter from me," West said. "Create a document with your big ticket issues on it and the lessons learned so I can start getting them addressed. I don't want to be sitting here next year talking about these issues again."

Top of the list was the inconsistent application of visa requirements for yacht crew. Depending on the customs agent, crew with B1/B2 visas are admitted for usually about six months with no problem; sometimes the agent insists on the C1/D visa and denies entry.

Another is the amount of export duties -- or lack of import duties -- that make it harder for U.S. boat builders to compete globally.

Billy Smith of Trinity Yachts described a recent launch, a 161-foot motoryacht, that was sent to China. The buyer had to pay 48 percent in taxes to take delivery.

"If Chinese boats coming here had to pay those taxes, they wouldn't be here," he said.

About half the cost of building a boat is in the labor, which is where overseas builders get an

advantage, he said. Add to that the duties and it's hard for U.S. builders to compete, he said.

"We can teach a kid to weld and within a year, he's making \$50,000, buying a home, invested in the local community," Smith said. "The labor that goes into these boats is skilled labor. If we don't have them, they [skilled people] will go someplace else. We can compete internationally. We just need a level playing field.

"What we really need," he continued, "is stability. People with money are not spending it because they don't know what's going to happen next. If they don't buy yachts, it's not going to hurt the man with \$30-\$40 million; it's going to hurt the blue-collar employee who's not working to build that yacht."

Ken Hickling of Awlgrip got the most laughs of the meeting when he said that buying a superyacht may just be the most humanitarian thing a wealthy person can do with his money.

"The best way to extract wealth from wealthy people -- and it appears to me that's what he [President Obama] wants to do, extract wealth -- is with a superyacht," Hickling said. "Fifty million dollars can buy a jet, jewelry, art, but a \$50 million yacht oozes \$5 million a year in maintenance, crew, and all that. That's money ingested into every local community a yacht visits.

"After giving to charity, buying a superyacht is the most ethical thing you can do," he said. "It's a rich guy dispersing his money."

West dismissed the notion of class that seems to be behind the Occupy Wall Street movement, supporting instead the notion that anyone can succeed in America and should be encouraged to do so. But that's not what's happening in Washington right now, he said.

"The public sector does not create wealth," he said. "Small business is being throttled to death because of what's coming down from Washington. Show me any time in the history of the world when nationalizing production where that ends up being good for an economy."

Another issue that's coming up that crew will eventually feel is the bureaucratic interpretation and implementation of the Longshore legislation passed in 2009 that may reverse the insurance benefits that companies doing business in shipyards gained. In some cases, "pleasure" vessels may be considered "commercial" vessels when in shipyards in the United States, changing the insurance and labor rules completely.

"That is unacceptable," said Kristina Hebert, COO of Ward's Marine Electric who spent seven years convincing lawmakers to change the law in the first place.

West is already tackling this issue and expects to make a public statement about union influence tomorrow.

"We cannot allow special interests to change law in the United States of America," West said. "It's wrong."

As for that AAR, industry groups and leaders have their work cut out for them. He expects it on his desk by Jan. 15.

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