

by Lynn Hoenke, Communications Coordinator



The Homeward Bound Flotilla has come to a close, and all 184 boats have safely made landfall in the US or Canada. The Flotilla had 473 sailors, multiple countries (31 non-US flagged vessels), 3 tropical storms, and over 240,000 boat miles collectively sailed. Whew! No wonder the Salty Dawg Sailing Association volunteers are exhausted after 11 weeks of planning, plotting, texting, tracking, and rescuing from afar.

With hundreds of cruisers “stuck” in the Caribbean as hurricane season approached the SDSA organized the Homeward Bound flotilla to help get sailors to safety. All sailors were welcome and many were quick to sign up for the assistance. With about a month to set up and implement weather planning, boat tracking, and safety-net assistance the Dawg board and volunteers drew on years of rally planning to create a system to help the short-handed cruisers safely home.

The boats left in fleets of “manageable sizes” between April 12 and May 20. In keeping with Salty Dawg practice, each captain was free to set the vessel departure date according to weather, crew comfort, and readiness. Participation was free, but donations were accepted to

cover Chris Parker and other expenses. All interested were permitted to participate, figuring it was safer that they went with us, rather than taking on a long ocean passage on their own.

Each boat that participated was asked to “check in” at least twice a day with a position report. Their position was collected by PredictWind and displayed on the Flotilla Tracking Map. Meanwhile, the Shoreside Coordinators kept track of the map. If a vessel didn’t report in for 36 hours, the team would try to contact the boat to locate them. There was a plan in place for assistance from the U. S. Coast Guard if shoreside efforts were unsuccessful.

There was also a three-member Emergency Response Team made up of exceptional and experienced blue water sailors. Any situation that came to the Shoreside Coordinators that seems “exceptional” or an “emergency” was referred to them. During the flotilla this team assisted with several such situations including broken shrouds, engine loss, steering loss, and communication issues.

The largest hurdle for the support team was the sheer size of the participation. With Salty Dawg Fall Rallies typically running at 80 - 100 boats, having 184 was a challenge. The rapidly changing situations of closing national borders and changing regulations was an additional factor to deal with, including coming into the USA; which ports were open, what marinas had space, what was the process for checking in. These things changed as the boats were making their way to safety. With borders closed to all incoming traffic, the SDSA described to participants what was happening. The Shoreside Team informed of tropical storms that were coming, and processed 155 exceptions safe passage through the Bahamas, including emergency stops for fuel, or anchoring for rest and shelter.

Hats off to the 473 sailors and the 23 volunteers who made it safe. An epic adventure.