

Log M. 226

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Forwarded to:

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SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-83-75

The National Transportation Safety Board has long been concerned about the role of alcohol in the many recreational boating accidents, fatalities, and injuries that occur annually. As early as 1969, the Safety Board recommended that the Coast Guard and States use the same boating accident report and that it should include, as one important item, whether intoxication or other physical impairment was involved. <sup>1/</sup> Recent recreational boating accidents have heightened the Board's concern. Moreover, there is increased public awareness of the hazards of alcohol use in all modes of transportation. We know that the American National Red Cross shares the concern of the Safety Board for the protection of the recreational boating public and those involved in other water-related activities who are placed in life-threatening situations by those who dangerously operate boats while under the influence of alcohol. <sup>2/</sup>

Two recent accidents have highlighted the problem. On July 27, 1983, two recreational boats, one 17 feet long and one 30 feet long, collided on the Severn River near Annapolis, Maryland, killing four persons. The 30-foot boat went through the hull and then over the small vessel. All four persons killed were on the small vessel. There was evidence that considerable amounts of alcohol had been consumed by the persons in the 17-foot boat; the operator of the boat had a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.21 percent.

In a similar occurrence on August 31, 1983, a 26-foot recreational boat collided with the 95-foot dinner vessel DANDY on the Potomac River, Washington, D.C. The DANDY has a 200-passenger capacity. Fortunately, none of the dinner guests were injured when the recreational boat struck the bow of the DANDY. However, the operator of the small recreational boat was fatally injured. It was determined that the operator of the recreational boat had a BAC of 0.23 percent.

In both of these cases, the BAC was more than twice the generally accepted BAC of 0.10 percent established by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Congress, and most States, including the District of Columbia, as the level at which highway drivers are considered to be driving while intoxicated.

<sup>1/</sup> Safety Recommendation M-69-47 was issued February 13, 1969, in the National Transportation Safety Board's "Study of Recreational Boat Accidents, Boating Safety Programs, and Preventive Recommendations."

<sup>2/</sup> For more detailed information, read Safety Study--"Recreational Boating Safety and Alcohol" (NTSB/SS-83/02).

During its study of the role of alcohol in recreational boating accidents, fatalities, and injuries, the Safety Board found that the Coast Guard and State boating law authorities suspect alcohol use to be a major factor in the high number of recreational boating fatalities. However, representative and credible national statistics are not available. Several factors affect the national statistics issued by the Coast Guard, including:

- o Not all accidents were reported to the States or to the Coast Guard.
- o Only in the approximately 25 percent of the fatal accidents investigated by the Coast Guard is there any assurance of verification of injuries, property damage, or definitive primary and secondary causes.
- o Compliance with reporting requirements varies from location to location and is influenced by Coast Guard and State enforcement practices and programs.
- o Boating accident reports are usually completed by the person involved in the accident or next of kin, who may not provide accurate and objective information about the accident.

Nationally, there are no uniform reporting requirements or guidelines for collecting information on the use of alcohol in recreational boating accidents, fatalities, and injuries. For example, in 1982, the Coast Guard received reports on 5,377 recreational boating accidents which resulted in 1,178 fatalities, 2,682 injuries, and \$15.3 million in property damage. Based on data available to the Coast Guard, only 95 of these recreational boating accidents involved alcohol as a primary or secondary cause, resulting in 70 fatalities, 22 injuries, and property damage of \$46,700. This amounts to 1.8 percent of the accidents and 6 percent of the fatalities. However, based on some State data that have recently become available, the use of alcohol and its effects in recreational boating accidents, fatalities, and injuries appear to be grossly underreported. In two States, information received indicates that 35 to 38 percent of the fatalities in recreational boating accidents were "legally drunk" at the generally accepted BAC of 0.10 percent. Additionally, one State indicates that as high as 80 percent of the fatalities in 1 year were alcohol related, and in one State 75 percent of the accidents over a 3-year period were alcohol related.

The objective of the United States Coast Guard's Boating Safety Program is to minimize the risk of loss of life, personal injury, and property damage resulting from the use of recreational boats. The statutory authority for this program is found in the Federal Boat Safety Act of 1971, as amended, which authorizes national boat construction safety standards, creates a flexible regulatory system, encourages greater uniformity of States' boating laws and regulations, provides for Federal financial assistance to States and public nonprofit organizations, and establishes a National Boating Safety Advisory Council. Within the overall program, the Coast Guard has three subprograms which broadly encompass education, enforcement, and technical areas. The problem of alcohol use in recreational boating could be addressed through two of these subprograms--education and enforcement.

The education program includes developing minimum "guides" to address accident scenarios, approving State education programs, supporting the public education programs of the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary, and cooperating with volunteer organizations

such as the United States Power Squadrons and the American National Red Cross. The development of a uniform national education program to address the use of alcohol and the hazards it poses to safe recreational boating that could be incorporated into existing educational programs should pose no serious problems or demands on Coast Guard resources.

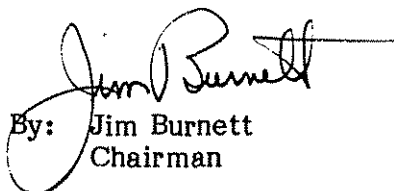
The Safety Board believes your organization can play an invaluable role by ensuring that recreational boat operators receive information in safe boating educational courses that indicate the hazards of alcohol use and its effects on safe boating operations. Topics the Safety Board believes should be addressed include the stages of alcoholic influence and its symptoms, the marine environment, and how the effect of alcohol intensifies the hazards for safe boating operations, particularly loss of peripheral vision, balance, and information processing.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the American National Red Cross:

In cooperation with the United States Coast Guard, develop and incorporate into your safe boating courses materials on the hazards of alcohol use and its effects on recreational boat operators. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-83-75)

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility . . .to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations (P.L. 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of our safety recommendation and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation in this letter.

BURNETT, Chairman, and McADAMS, BURSLEY, and ENGEN, Members, concurred in this recommendation. GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, did not participate.

  
By: Jim Burnett  
Chairman