

Lg M-83

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: November 16, 1983

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Forwarded to:

Admiral James S. Gracey  
Commandant  
U.S. Coast Guard  
Washington, D.C. 20593

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-83-79 through -81

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About 1000 Pacific standard time on February 16, 1983, the U.S. charter passenger vessel SAN MATEO capsized at the entrance to Morro Bay Harbor, California, with 32 persons — 23 children and 7 adult passengers — on board. Although no one on board was killed as a result of this accident, 4 persons were seriously injured and the vessel, valued at approximately \$45,000, was lost. 1/

The testimony of the adult passengers indicated that no safety orientation was provided to the passengers before the SAN MATEO got underway. The testimony of the owner and the deckhand indicated that there were no instructional placards that met the safety orientation requirements of the regulations on board the vessel. The Board believes that a safety orientation of passengers on small passenger vessels, such as the SAN MATEO, is vital. Such vessels usually operate singly, are often exposed to rigorous sea conditions, and typically have small operating crews in relation to the number of passengers carried. These operational conditions are routine in the charter passenger trade and demand that passengers be informed about the lifesaving devices available to them. Current regulations provide that information concerning lifesaving devices may be transmitted to passengers by means of public announcements or posted instructional placards. However, an emergency situation aboard this type of vessel is likely to develop rapidly, leaving little time, and probably little inclination, for passengers to search out and read instructional placards regarding lifesaving devices. Rather than relying upon placards as the means to convey such vital information to passengers, the Board believes that audio/visual instructional announcements to the passengers, which include actual demonstrations of proper donning of life preservers, should be required prior to the time that small passenger vessels depart protected waters.

None of the passengers on board the SAN MATEO was wearing a life preserver when the vessel capsized. According to one adult passenger, one of the passengers specifically asked for a life preserver and was told that it would be provided as soon as the vessel was underway. The Safety Board believes that, considering the apparent concern of the operator for the weather and sea conditions and considering the prevalence of hazardous conditions at the entrance to Morro Bay Harbor during the winter of 1982/1983, the operator should have instructed his passengers to don life preservers upon departure.

1/ For more detailed information, read: "Marine Accident Report—Capsizing of the Charter Passenger Vessel SAN MATEO, Morro Bay, California, February 16, 1983" (NTSB/MAR-83-09).

While Federal regulations only require that one life preserver be carried for every person on board a small passenger vessel, lifesaving devices must be worn if they are to be of any use in a sudden emergency. There may be a reluctance on the part of small passenger vessel operators to require or even to suggest that passengers don life preservers when getting underway from a dock. They may fear that such a requirement or suggestion would needlessly frighten their passengers which would somehow adversely affect them economically. However, if passengers are routinely asked to don life preservers in situations involving a possible hazard, i.e. crossing a bar, encountering a squall, or undergoing a tow, they will not be frightened any more than airline passengers are frightened when instructed to fasten seatbelts in flight because of possible turbulence. Adult passengers may be reluctant to request that they be provided with life preservers because of a fear of ridicule from other adult passengers. Additionally, they may be hesitant to use safety equipment in the absence of an actual emergency unless they are told to do so. Accordingly, the Safety Board believes that adult passengers on small passenger vessels should be alerted that they will be requested to don life preservers when possibly hazardous conditions may be expected to be encountered.

The SAN MATEO was carrying 23 children, some of whom could not swim. If not for the alertness and quick response of the harbor patrol and Coast Guard personnel, a number of lives would likely have been lost as a result of the capsizing. The Board believes that the carriage of children on small passenger vessels which operate on other than protected waters presents a special safety problem that is not adequately addressed under current regulations. When a small passenger vessel is about to sink or capsize in unprotected waters, there may not be time to insure that all of the children are properly outfitted with life preservers. Children would have greatly reduced chances of survival in the water without life preservers. The Board, therefore, believes that Federal regulations should be amended to require that all children wear life preservers while the vessel is departing protected waters and until such time as the operator determines that it is safe to remove them.

There were 32 persons on board the SAN MATEO when the vessel capsized. According to Federal regulations, the vessel should have had 32 adult size life preservers and 4 child size life preservers on board. Since the harbor patrol recovered only 30 adult size and 3 child size life preservers after the accident, the Safety Board concludes that it is likely that the vessel did not have the required number of life preservers aboard when it left the dock. However, since no one aboard was wearing life preservers when the vessel capsized, this deficiency had no effect upon the outcome of the accident. Adult size life preservers are intended to fit persons over 90 pounds in body weight; 8 of the 23 child passengers on the SAN MATEO weighed 90 pounds or less and might not have been effectively supported by adult size life preservers. In this case, even if the SAN MATEO had been outfitted with the currently required number of life preservers for this trip, it would not have had enough child size life preservers to accommodate the number of persons requiring them. The Safety Board believes that passengers on board small passenger vessels that depart from protected waters should be provided appropriately sized life preservers, based on their body weight. Therefore, 46 CFR 180.25 should be amended to require that each vessel operator provide an approved child size life preserver for each child less than 90 pounds in weight when the vessel operates on other than protected waters.


Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the U.S. Coast Guard:

Amend 46 CFR 185.25 to require that a safety orientation briefing, which includes a demonstration of the proper method of donning life preservers, be provided to passengers on board small passenger vessels that operate on other than protected waters. This briefing should include a statement that all passengers will be requested to don life preservers when possibly hazardous conditions may be expected to be encountered. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-83-79)

Amend 46 CFR Part 185 to require that children carried on board small passenger vessels wear life preservers while the vessel is departing protected waters and until such time as the operator determines that it is safe to remove them. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-83-80)

Amend 46 CFR 180.25 to require that one approved child size life preserver be provided for each child less than 90 pounds in weight carried on board small passenger vessels that operate on other than protected waters. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-83-81)

BURNETT, Chairman, GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, BURSLEY and ENGEN, Members, concurred in these recommendations. McADAMS, Member, did not participate.

By:   
Jim Burnett  
Chairman