

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE**Office of the Secretary****32 CFR Part 199****[0720-AA75]****TRICARE; Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS); Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children Overseas****AGENCY:** Office of the Secretary, Department of Defense.**ACTION:** Interim final Rule.

SUMMARY: This interim final rule implements section 674 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000. Section 674 directed the Department of Defense to establish a program to provide supplemental food and nutrition education services to members of the armed forces on duty at stations outside the United States (and its territories and possessions) and to eligible civilians serving with, employed by, or accompanying the armed forces at these locations. Congress directed that the Department implement the special supplemental nutrition program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in a manner that provides a benefit that is "similar" to the benefit provided to participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Receipt of benefits under both the domestic WIC and the DoD programs is conditioned on applicants meeting specified eligibility criteria, *i.e.*, categorical (pregnant, postpartum, breastfeeding women, infants or children up to age 5), residency, income and nutritional risk. The Department was directed to use the USDA eligibility criteria to the extent practicable. This interim final rule specifies eligibility requirements, describes the benefits available under the program, and provides administrative guidance on program operation. The Department is publishing this rule as an interim final rule in order to meet the statutory directive that the Secretary of Defense prescribe regulations to administer the program. Public comments, however, are invited and will be considered when the rule is published as a final rule.

DATES: This interim final rule is effective the first day of the month after 60 days from publication of the interim final rule. Written comments will be accepted until September 22, 2003.

ADDRESSES: Forward comments to Operations Directorate, TRICARE

Management Activity, 5111 Leesburg Pike, Suite 810, Falls Church, VA.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Danita F. Hunter, Operations Directorate, TRICARE Management Activity, telephone (703) 681-0039.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**A. Introduction**

In the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000, Congress mandated that the Department establish and fund a program to provide a special supplemental food and nutrition education program to eligible low-income families overseas whose members have been determined to be at nutritional risk. This program is known as the Women, Infants, and Children Overseas (WIC Overseas) program. This interim final rule implements section 674 of this Act.

B. Eligibility

To be eligible for the DoD special supplemental food program, a person must be a member of the armed forces on duty at stations outside the U.S. (and its territories and possessions) or an eligible civilian serving with, employed by, or accompanying the armed forces outside the U.S. (and its territories and possessions). Additionally, the person must be found to be at nutritional risk. Specifically, to be certified as eligible to receive benefits under the program, a person must:

- Meet specified program income guidelines published by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and
- Meet one of the criteria listed in this regulation as indicative of nutritional risk. Determinations of income eligibility and nutritional risk will be made to the extent practicable using applicable standards used by the USDA in determining eligibility for the domestic Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. In determining income eligibility, the Department will use the Department of Health and Human Services income poverty table for the state of Alaska.

C. Scope of Benefit

The purpose of the program is to provide supplemental foods and nutrition education to serve as an adjunct to good health care during critical times of growth and development, in order to prevent the occurrence of health problems, including drug and other substance abuse, and to improve the health status of program participants. The benefit is similar to the benefit provided under the domestic WIC program.

Under the program, eligible participants are provided with drafts

(paper food instruments, similar to vouchers) that may be redeemed at specified intervals for food packages. Participants access the food benefit by redeeming drafts at designated commissaries and NEXMARTS overseas. Food packages are prescribed by program staff who choose from a range of available food packages to tailor the benefit to the needs of program participants.

The program also provides nutrition education and counseling services to all participants at specified intervals. Nutrition education sessions are designed to stress the relationship between proper nutrition and good health with special emphasis on the nutritional needs of pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children less than 5 years of age and to achieve a positive change in food habits, resulting in improved nutrition status and the prevention of nutrition-related health problems. Nutrition education promotes breastfeeding as the optimal method of infant nutrition. Nutritional education includes educating women participating in the program about the harmful effects of substance abuse. Nutrition education is an integral element of the WIC Overseas program; however, a participant may not be denied supplemental food benefits for failure to attend or participate in nutrition education activities. Nutrition education sessions are conducted in the context of the ethnic, cultural, and geographical preferences of participants.

D. Financial and Administrative Requirements

The Secretary of Defense will establish a system for verifying appropriate use of the WIC Overseas Program funds. This will include procedures to verify that draft redemption complies with applicable date-to-use, dollar amount, and other relevant criteria.

To leverage available funding to make the WIC Overseas program available to the maximum number of participants, the Secretary of Defense may enter into agreement up to three years in length to procure a particular brand of a food item to provide to Program participants. The agreement would specify the procurement of the competitively selected brand exclusive of other brands of the same or similar food. Competitive selection of the contract brand would conform to competitive contracting procedures specified in title 10, chapter 137, U.S. Code. The agreement would provide for the manufacturer of the contract brand to rebate to the Secretary an amount that is an agreed ratio of the

amounts paid by the Secretary for the procurement of the contract brand. Rebates collected under the agreements will be credited to the appropriation available for carrying out the WIC Overseas program and will be available for the program in the same period as the other sums in the appropriation.

The Secretary will provide for an appeals process that will allow individuals who are denied certification or recertification to appeal those decisions. The process will include a requirement that individuals denied certification or recertification be advised of their right of appeal, the relevant time limits, and the procedures to effect an appeal and will further provide a second level of review to individuals adversely impacted by an appeals decision.

E. Regulatory Procedures

This interim rule will impose additional information collection requirements to the public under the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (44 U.S.C. 3501–3511). Individuals will be required to apply for certification and periodic recertification to receive benefits.

This rule is being issued as an interim final rule, with comment period, as an exception to our standard practice of soliciting public comments prior to issuance. The Assistant Secretary of Defense (Health Affairs) has determined that following the standard practice in this case would be impracticable, unnecessary, and contrary to public interest. This determination is based on the fact that this change directly implements a statutory entitlement enacted by Congress expressly for this purpose. All public comments are invited and will be carefully considered. We anticipate the issuance of a final rule within 6 months of the end of the comment period.

Executive Order 12866 requires certain regulatory assessments for any “significant regulatory action” defined as one that would result in an annual effect on the economy of \$100 million or more, or have other substantial impacts. The Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA) requires that each federal agency prepare, and make available for public comment, a regulatory flexibility analysis when the agency issues a regulation which would have a significant impact on a substantial number of small entities. This final rule is a significant regulatory action and has been revised by the Office of Management and Budget under Executive Order 12866. The annual cost of this program is estimated to be about \$24 million per year, beginning in Fiscal

Year 2002. This rule is not economically significant and will not significantly affect a substantial number of small entities. The information collection notice was published on March 21, 2003 (68 FR 13906).

List of Subjects in 32 CFR Part 199

Department of Defense; Food assistance programs; women, infants and children

■ Accordingly, 32 CFR Part 199 is amended as follows:

PART 199—[AMENDED]

■ 1. The authority citation for part 199 continues to read as follows:

Authority: 5 U.S.C. 301 and 10 U.S.C. chapters 53 and 55.

■ 2. Title 32, CFR part 199 is amended by adding § 199.23 to read as follows:

§ 199.23. Special Supplemental Food Program.

(a) *General provisions.* This section prescribes guidelines and policies for the delivery and administration of the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children Overseas (WIC Overseas Program). The purpose of the WIC Overseas Program is to provide supplemental foods and nutrition education, at no cost, to eligible persons and to serve as an adjunct to good health care during critical times of growth and development, in order to prevent the occurrence of health problems, including drug and other substance abuse, and to improve the health status of program participants. The benefit is similar to the benefit provided under the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administered Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program.

(b) *Definitions.* For most definitions applicable to the provisions of this section, refer to § 199.2 of this chapter. The following definitions apply only to this section:

(1) *Applicant.* Pregnant women, breastfeeding women, postpartum women, infants, and children who are applying to receive WIC Overseas benefits, and the breastfed infants of applicant breastfeeding women. This term also includes individuals who are currently participating in the Program but are re-applying because their certification is about to expire.

(2) *Breastfeeding women.* Women up to 1-year postpartum who are breastfeeding their infants. Their eligibility will end on the last day of the month of their infant’s first birthday.

(3) *Certification.* The implementation of criteria and procedures to assess and

document each applicant’s eligibility for the Program.

(4) *Children.* Persons who have had their first birthday but have not yet attained their fifth birthday. Their eligibility will end on the last day of the month of their fifth birthday.

(5) *Competent Professional Authority (CPA).* An individual on the staff of the WIC Overseas office authorized to determine nutritional risk, prescribe supplemental foods, and design nutrition education programs. The following are authorized to serve as a competent professional authority: Physicians, nutritionists, registered nurses, and dietitians may serve as a competent professional authority. Additionally, a CPA may be other persons designated by the regional program manager who meet the definition of CPA prescribed by the USDA as being professionally competent to evaluate nutritional risk. The definition also applies to an individual who is not on the staff of the WIC Overseas office but who is qualified to provide data upon which nutritional risk determinations are made by a competent professional authority on the staff of the local WIC Overseas office.

(6) *Contract brand.* The brand of a particular food item that has been competitively selected by the DoD to be the exclusive supplier of that type of food item to the program.

(7) *Date-to-use.* The date by which the drafts must be used to purchase food items.

(8) *Department.* The Department of Defense (DoD), unless otherwise noted.

(9) *Dependent.* (i) A spouse, or

(ii) An unmarried child who is:

(A) Under 21 years of age; or

(B) Incapable of self-support because of mental or physical incapacity and is in fact dependent on the member for more than 1/2 of the child’s support; or

(C) Is under 23 years of age, is enrolled in a full-time course of study in an institution of higher education and is in fact dependent on the member for more than one-half of the child’s support.

(10) *Drafts.* Paper food instruments, similar to vouchers, issued in the WIC Overseas offices to program participants. Participants may redeem their drafts at participating commissaries and NEXMARTs for the types and quantities of foods specified on the face of the draft.

(11) *Economic unit.* All individuals contributing to or subsidizing the income of a household, whether they physically reside in that household or not.

(12) *Eligible civilian.* An eligible civilian is a person who is not a member of the armed forces and who is:

(i) A dependent of a member of the armed forces residing with the member outside the United States, whether or not that dependent is command sponsored, or

(ii) An employee of a military department who is a national of the United States and is residing outside the United States in connection with such individual's employment or a dependent of such individual residing with the employee outside the United States; or

(iii) An employee of a Department of Defense contractor who is a national of the United States and is residing outside the United States in connection with such individual's employment or a dependent of such individual residing with the employee outside the United States.

(13) *Family.* A group of related or non-related individuals who are one economic unit.

(14) *Hematological test.* A test of an applicant's or participant's blood as described in 7 CFR 246.7(e).

(15) *Income guidelines.* Income poverty guidelines prescribed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). These guidelines are adjusted annually by the DHHS, with each annual adjustment effective July 1 of each year. For purposes of WIC Overseas Program income eligibility determinations, income guidelines shall mean the income guidelines published by the DHHS pertaining to the State of Alaska.

(16) *Infants.* Persons under 1 year of age.

(17) *National of the U.S.* A person who:

(i) Is a citizen of the U.S., or

(ii) Is not a citizen of the United States, but who owes permanent allegiance to the United States, as determined in accordance with the Immigration and Nationality Act.

(18) *NEXMART.* Navy Exchange Market.

(19) *Nutrition education.* Individual or group sessions and the provision of materials designed to improve health status, achieve positive change in dietary habits, and emphasize relationships between nutrition and health, all in keeping with the individual's personal, cultural, and socioeconomic preferences.

(20) *Nutritional risk.* (i) The presence of detrimental or abnormal nutritional conditions detectable by biochemical, physical, developmental or anthropometric data, or

(ii) Other documented nutritionally related medical conditions, or

(iii) Documented evidence of dietary deficiencies that impair or endanger health, or

(iv) Conditions that directly affect the nutritional health of a person, such as alcoholism or drug abuse, or

(v) Conditions that predispose persons to inadequate nutritional patterns, habits of poor nutritional choices or nutritionally related medical conditions.

(21) *Participants.* Pregnant women, breastfeeding women, postpartum women, infants, and children who are receiving supplemental foods or food instruments under the WIC Overseas Program, and the breastfed infants of participant breastfeeding women.

(22) *Postpartum women.* Women up to 6 months after the end of their pregnancy. Their eligibility will end on the last day of the sixth month after their delivery.

(23) *Pregnant women.* Women determined to have one or more embryos or fetuses in utero. Pregnant women are eligible to receive WIC benefits through 6 weeks postpartum, at which time they reapply for the program as postpartum or breastfeeding women.

(24) *Rebate.* The amount of money refunded under cost containment procedures to the Department from the manufacturer of a contract brand food item.

(25) *Regional lead agent.* The designated major military medical center that acts as the regional lead agent, having tri-service responsibility for the development and execution of a single, integrated health care network.

(26) *Supplemental foods.* Foods containing nutrients determined by nutritional research to be lacking in the diets of certain pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, infants, and children. WIC Overseas may substitute different foods providing the nutritional equivalent of foods prescribed by Domestic WIC programs, as required by 10 U.S.C. 1060a(c)(1)(B).

(27) *Verification.* Verification of drafts is a review before payment out of Defense Health Program funds to determine whether the commissary or NEXMART complied with applicable date-to-use, food specification, and other redemption criteria.

(c) *Certification of eligibility.* (1) To the extent practicable, participants shall be certified as eligible to receive Program benefits according to income and nutritional risk certification guidelines contained in regulations published by the USDA pertaining to the Women, Infants, and Children program required under 7 CFR

246.7(d)(2)(iv)(B). Applicants must meet the following eligibility criteria:

(i) Meet one of the participant type requirements: Be a member of the armed forces on duty overseas; a family member/dependent of a member of the armed forces on duty overseas; a U.S. national employee of a military department serving overseas; a family member of a U.S. national employee of a DoD contractor serving overseas; a family member of a U.S. national employee of a DoD contractor serving overseas;

(ii) Reside in the geographic area serviced by the WIC Overseas office;

(iii) Meet the income criteria specified in this section; and

(iv) Meet the nutrition risk criteria specified in this section.

(2) In terms of income eligibility, the following apply:

(i) The Department of Defense shall use the Alaska income poverty guidelines published by the DHHS for making determinations regarding income eligibility for the Program.

(ii) Program income eligibility guidelines shall be adjusted annually to conform to annual adjustments made by the DHHS.

(iii) For income eligibility, the Program may consider the income of the family during the past 12 months and the family's current rate of income to determine which indicator accurately reflects the family's status.

(iv) A pregnant woman who is ineligible for participation in the Program because she does not meet income criteria shall be deemed eligible if the criteria would be met by increasing the number of individuals in her family (economic unit) by the number of embryos or fetuses in utero.

(v) The Program shall define income according to USDA regulations with regard to the USDA-administered WIC Program. In particular—

(A) A basic allowance for housing is excluded from income as required by section 674 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000.

(B) The value of in-kind housing benefits is excluded from income as required under USDA regulations.

(C) Cost of living allowances for duty outside the continental U.S. (OCONUS) is excluded from income as required under 7 CFR 246.7(d)(2)(iv)(A)(2).

(D) Public assistance and welfare payments are included in income.

(3) Participants must be found to be at nutritional risk to be eligible for program benefits.

(i) A Competent Professional Authority (CPA) shall determine if an applicant is at nutritional risk.

(ii) At the request of the program, applicants shall provide, according to

schedules set by the USDA in 7 CFR 246.7(e) (unless deemed impracticable), nutritional risk data as a condition of certification in the Program. Such data includes:

- (A) Anthropometric measurements,
- (B) The results of hematological tests,
- (C) Physical examination,
- (D) Dietary information, or
- (E) Developmental testing

(iii) A pregnant woman who meets all other eligibility criteria and for whom a nutritional risk assessment cannot immediately be completed will be considered presumptively eligible to participate in the Program for a period up to 60 days.

(iv) Infants under 6 months of age may be deemed to be at nutritional risk if the infant's mother was a Program participant during pregnancy or if medical records document that the mother was at nutritional risk during pregnancy.

(v) Unless otherwise specified herein or in 7 CFR 246.7(e), required nutritional risk data shall be provided to, or obtained by, the WIC Overseas Program office within 90 days of enrollment.

(4) In the event that it is impracticable for the WIC Overseas Program to adhere to the income and nutritional risk eligibility guidelines contained in USDA regulations, the Director, TRICARE Management Activity (TMA) may waive the Department's use of USDA WIC Program eligibility criteria by determining that it is impracticable to use these standards to certify participants in the WIC Overseas Program.

(i) Such determination shall consider relevant practical, administrative, national security, financial factors and existing Department policies and their application to the population served by the WIC Overseas Program.

(ii) Absent a written finding of impracticability described in § 199.23(c)(4), the eligibility criteria for the WIC program, contained in USDA regulations shall apply.

(5) An applicant for the WIC Overseas Program who presents a valid WIC Program Verification of Certification card, which is issued to participants in the domestic WIC Program when they intend to move, shall be considered eligible for participation in the WIC Overseas Program for the duration of the individual's current domestic WIC certification period, as long as he/she is an eligible service/family member or eligible civilian/family member.

(d) *Program benefits.* (1) Drafts. WIC participants shall be issued drafts that may be redeemed for supplemental food prescribed under the program.

(i) Drafts shall at a minimum list the food items to be redeemed and the date-to-use.

(ii) Food items listed on the draft must be approved for use under the Program.

(iii) Drafts generally shall allow for a three-month supply of food items for each participant, unless the participant's nutritional status necessitates more frequent contacts with the WIC Overseas office.

(iv) Participating commissaries and NEXMARTS shall accept the drafts in exchange for approved food items.

(v) Commissary and NEXMART personnel shall be trained on verification and processing of drafts.

(vi) Program guidelines shall provide for training of new participants in how to redeem drafts.

(2) *Supplemental food.* Participants shall redeem drafts for appropriate food packages at intervals determined in accordance with the USDA regulations.

(i) The Director, TMA shall identify to the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) and NEXCOM a list of food items approved for the WIC Overseas Program. This list shall be developed in consultation with the USDA and shall include information regarding the appropriate package and/or container sizes and quantities available for participants, as well as the frequency with which food items can be acquired. Additions and/or deletions of food items from this list shall be communicated to the commissaries and NEXMARTS on an ongoing basis.

(ii) A CPA shall prescribe appropriate foods from among the approved list to be included in food packages.

(iii) A CPA shall coordinate documentation of medical need when such documentation is a prerequisite for prescribing certain food items.

(iv) The Director, TMA may authorize changes regarding the supplemental foods to be made available in the WIC Overseas Program when local conditions preclude strict compliance or when such compliance is impracticable.

(3) *Nutrition education.* Nutrition education shall be provided to all participants at intervals prescribed in USDA regulations at 7 CFR 246.11.

(i) The WIC Overseas nutrition education program shall be locally overseen by a CPA based on guidance and materials provided by TMA.

(ii) Nutrition education and its means of delivery shall be tailored to the greatest extent practicable to the specific nutritional, cultural, practical, and other needs of the participant. Participant profiles created during certification may be used in designing appropriate nutrition education. A CPA may

develop individual care plans, as necessary, consistent with USDA regulations.

(iii) Nutrition education shall consist of sessions wherein individual participants or groups of participants meet with a CPA in an interactive setting such that participants can ask, and the CPA can answer, questions related to nutrition practices. In addition, nutrition education shall utilize prepared educational materials and/or Internet sites. Both the sessions and the information materials shall be designed to improve health status, achieve positive change in dietary habits, and emphasize relationships between nutrition and health.

Individual and group sessions can be accomplished through, among other things, face-to-face meetings, remote tele-videoconferencing, real-time computer-based distance learning, or other means.

(iv) Nutrition education services shall generally be provided to participants twice during each 6-month certification period, unless a different schedule is specified in USDA regulations.

(v) The nutrition education program shall promote breastfeeding as the optimal method of infant nutrition, encourage pregnant participants to breastfeed unless contraindicated for health reasons, and educate all participating women about the harmful effects of substance abuse.

(vi) Individual participants shall not be denied supplemental food due to the failure to attend scheduled nutrition education sessions.

(e) *Financial management.* The Department shall establish procedures to provide for the verification of drafts prior to payment.

(i) Verification may utilize sampling techniques.

(ii) Payment of drafts shall be made out of Defense Health Program funds.

(f) *Rebate agreements.* (1) DoD is authorized to enter into an agreement with a manufacturer of a particular brand of a food item that provides for the exclusive supply to the program of the same or similar types of food items by that manufacturer.

(i) The agreement shall identify a contract brand of food item.

(ii) Under the agreement, the manufacturer shall rebate to the Department an agreed portion of the amounts paid by DoD for the procurement of the contract brand.

(2) The DoD shall use competitive procedures under 10 U.S.C. 137 to select the contract brand.

(3) Amounts rebated shall be credited to the appropriation available for carrying out the program and shall be

applied against expenditures for the program in the same period as the other sums in the appropriation.

(g) *Administrative appeals and civil rights.* (1) Applicants who are denied certification or participants that are denied recertification shall be provided with a notice of ineligibility. The notice shall include information on the applicant's right to appeal the determination and instructions on doing so.

(2) Benefits shall not be provided while an appeal is pending when an applicant is denied benefits, a participant's certification has expired or a participant becomes categorically ineligible.

(3) A request for appeal shall be submitted in writing within 5 working days. If the decision is an adverse one it shall include notice to the applicant of his further appeal rights as reflected in paragraph (g)(4)(iii) of this section, and that he/she has 5 working days to effect any such appeal.

(4) Appeal reviews shall be conducted in the first instance by the CPA or team leader in charge of the local WIC Overseas office.

(i) Written notice of a decision shall be provided to the applicant within 5 working days.

(ii) If the appeal is upheld, retroactive benefits shall not be provided.

(iii) At an applicant's request a denied appeal may be forwarded to the regional program manager for review, who will provide a decision on the appeal within 5 working days.

(iv) If the regional program manager denies the appeal, there shall be no further right of appeal.

(5) Complaints about discriminatory treatment shall be handled in accordance with procedures established at each local WIC Overseas site.

(h) *Operations and Administration.* (1) Information collected about WIC Overseas applicants and participants shall be collected, maintained, and disclosed in accordance with applicable laws and regulations.

(2) Information and personnel security requirements shall be consistent with applicable laws and regulations.

Dated: June 27, 2003.

L.M. Bynum,

Alternate OSD Federal Register Liaison Officer, Department of Defense.

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BILLING CODE 5001-08-P

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Coast Guard

33 CFR Part 117

[CGD01-03-002]

RIN 1625-AA09

Drawbridge Operation Regulations; Shrewsbury River, NJ

AGENCY: Coast Guard, DHS.

ACTION: Final rule.

SUMMARY: The Coast Guard is changing the drawbridge operation regulations governing the operation of the Route 36 Bridge, mile 1.8, across The Shrewsbury River at Highlands, New Jersey. This final rule will synchronize the drawbridge opening schedules for the two moveable bridges across the Shrewsbury River during the boating season. This action is necessary to meet the present needs of navigation.

DATES: This rule is effective August 21, 2003.

ADDRESSES: Documents indicated in this preamble as being available in the docket are part of docket (CGD01-03-002) and are available for inspection or copying at the First Coast Guard District, Bridge Administration Office, 408 Atlantic Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts, 02110-3350, between 7 a.m. and 3 p.m., Monday through Friday, except Federal holidays.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Mr. Joe Arca, Project Officer, First Coast Guard District, (212) 668-7165.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Regulatory Information

On February 5, 2003, we published a notice of proposed rulemaking (NPRM) entitled Drawbridge Operation Regulations; Shrewsbury River, New Jersey, in the **Federal Register** (68 FR 5858). We received one comment letter in response to the notice of proposed rulemaking. No public hearing was requested and none was held.

Background and Purpose

The Route 36 Bridge, mile 1.8, across the Shrewsbury River at Highlands, New Jersey, has a vertical clearance of 35 feet at mean high water and 39 feet at mean low water.

The existing regulations listed at 33 CFR 117.755(a), require the Route 36 Bridge to open on signal; except that, from May 15 through October 15, 7 a.m. to 8 p.m., the draw need open only at quarter before the hour and quarter after the hour.

The Coast Guard received requests from mariners to change the drawbridge operation regulations that govern the Route 36 Bridge. Presently the two moveable bridges across the Shrewsbury River, the Route 36 Bridge, and the Monmouth County highway bridge, have staggered opening schedules during the boating season. The mariners have asked the Coast Guard to change the opening schedule for the Route 36 Bridge in order to synchronize the bridge opening times for the two moveable bridges during the boating season to help reduce vessel transit delays and enhance boating safety.

The second moveable bridge across the Shrewsbury River, the Monmouth County highway bridge, at mile 4.0, with a vertical clearance of 15 feet at mean high water and 17 feet at mean low water. The existing regulations listed at 33 CFR 117.755(b), require the bridge to open on signal; except that, from May 15 through September 30, on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., the draw need open only on the hour and half hour.

This final rule will synchronize the bridge opening times at the two bridges by requiring the Route 36 Bridge to open on signal from May 15 through October 15, 7 a.m. to 8 p.m., on the hour and half hour only.

Discussion of Comments and Changes

The Coast Guard received one comment letter opposed to the proposed rule change. That comment opposed having synchronous bridge openings at the Route 36 Bridge, mile 1.8, and the Monmouth County highway bridge, at mile 4.0, across the Shrewsbury River in New Jersey.

The objection stated that powerboats would be required to wait for bridge openings creating an unsafe condition on the waterway which would result in hardship for marine businesses in the area.

The Route 36 Bridge, with a vertical clearance of 35 ft above mean high water, passes the vast majority of power vessels without requiring an opening. This rule change, to synchronize both bridges operating schedules, was requested to assist the lower-powered sailboats that cannot transit between the bridges quickly enough to make consecutive bridge openings. The ensuing 20-25 minute wait for sailboats in swift river currents creates a hazardous navigational condition.

The potential for an adverse effect on marine businesses is not supported by the fact that only a few power vessels may have to wait up to 20 minutes for bridge openings.