



National Transportation Safety Board
Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: March 17, 2004

In reply refer to: M-04-01 and -02

Honorable Fran P. Mainella
Director
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

The National Transportation Safety Board (Safety Board) is an independent Federal agency charged by Congress with investigating transportation accidents, determining their probable cause, and making recommendations to prevent similar accidents from occurring. We are providing the following information to urge you to take action on the safety recommendations in this letter. The Safety Board is vitally interested in these recommendations because they are designed to prevent accidents and save lives.

The recommendations address the issue of preventive maintenance on tour boats operated by private contractors in various parts of the national park system. The recommendations derive from the Safety Board's investigation of the sinking of the small passenger vessel *Panther* in the Gulf Coast area of Everglades National Park, Florida, on December 30, 2002, and are consistent with the evidence we found and the analysis we performed.¹

The *Panther* was operated as a tour boat by Everglades National Park Boat Tours, which had been a concessionaire of the National Park Service for 40 years. The company offered tours of the Ten Thousand Islands area of Everglades National Park, operating from the National Park Service visitor center in Everglades City. As a result of its investigation, the Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the *Panther's* sinking was flooding through a hull breach, which resulted from an earlier grounding and

¹ For further information, see National Transportation Safety Board, *Sinking of the U.S. Small Passenger Vessel Panther Near Everglades City, Florida, December 30, 2002*, Marine Accident Report NTSB/MAR-04/01 (Washington, DC: NTSB, 2004).

which Everglades National Park Boat Tours neglected to address, instead choosing to operate the vessel with a known failure of watertight integrity and inappropriately relying on the bilge pumps to keep the vessel afloat, thus continually putting its passengers at risk.

The Safety Board's investigation of the *Panther* accident indicated serious deficiencies in the vessel's maintenance. The investigation revealed interior wood rot and raised questions about whether the starboard bilge pump and the high-level bilge alarm were operating at the time of the accident, in addition to uncovering the hull damage that allowed the vessel to flood and ultimately sink. A maintenance and repair program should include, among other things, actions a company should take if flooding is indicated. Two separate incidents in December 2002 indicated that the *Panther* was flooding. The maintenance procedures after those incidents centered on bilge pump repair and not on finding and eliminating the source of the flooding. The Safety Board concluded that if Everglades National Boat Tours had had a comprehensive maintenance and repair program in place, the *Panther* would have been taken out of the water (drydocked) after its earlier grounding and thoroughly examined, the hull breach would have been discovered and repaired, and the accident would have been avoided.

At the time of the accident, the National Park Service did not require Everglades National Park Boat Tours or any other of its tour boat concessionaires² to demonstrate that they had, and followed, a comprehensive maintenance and repair program for their vessels. After the accident, the National Park Service inserted a provision in its request for proposals for the Gulf Coast tour boat concession at Everglades National Park, stipulating that the successful bidder would have to implement a computerized preventive maintenance program to track and schedule maintenance items. Bidders were also asked about their experience in operating effective preventive maintenance programs for their vessels, and how they proposed to ensure that their operations would be conducted safely.

In the Safety Board's opinion, if that action were extended to all tour boat concessions in the national park system, it would increase the safety of passenger vessels operating from National Park Service facilities. The National Transportation Safety Board, therefore, makes the following safety recommendation to the National Park Service:

Require that concessionaire companies operating passenger vessels in your jurisdictions develop and implement a preventive maintenance program for all systems affecting the safe operation of their vessels, including the hull and mechanical and electrical systems. (M-04-01)

The National Park Service needs to ensure that such preventive maintenance programs adequately provide for public safety. The National Transportation Safety

² Everglades National Park Boat Tours had the sole concession for operating boat tours in the Gulf Coast area of Everglades National Park.

Board, therefore, makes a further safety recommendation to the National Park Service:

Establish oversight procedures to verify, on a regular basis, that concessionaires who operate passenger vessels in the national park system have adequate preventive maintenance and safety programs. (M-04-02)

We urge you to take action on the safety recommendations in this letter. The Safety Board would appreciate a response from you within 90 days addressing the actions you have taken or intend to take to implement our recommendations. Please refer to Safety Recommendations M-04-01 and M-04-02 in your reply. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 314-6177.

Chairman ENGLEMAN CONNERS, Vice Chairman ROSENKER, and Members CARMODY and HEALING concurred in this recommendation. Member GOGLIA did not participate.

By: Ellen Engleman Connors
Chairman