



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: August 11, 2010

In reply refer to: M-10-2 and -3

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In light of two recent maritime accidents, both involving U.S. Coast Guard patrol boats, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is concerned about the potential for crewmembers to be distracted by the use of cellular telephones and other wireless devices while engaged in vessel operations. The NTSB believes that such activities present a safety risk that should be addressed by the Coast Guard.

On December 5, 2009, at 2028 eastern standard time, the Coast Guard shore-based response boat¹ *CG 25689* collided with the small passenger vessel *Thriller 09* in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. The *Thriller 09*, carrying two crewmembers and 22 passengers, was on a tour to view Christmas lights around the harbor. The *CG 25689* and a second Coast Guard vessel, the *CG 25788*, each with three crewmembers on board, were returning to base after escorting a cargo vessel when the *CG 25689* struck the *Thriller 09*. Five passengers on the *Thriller 09* were injured and required treatment at local hospitals. A sixth passenger self-reported to the emergency room for treatment. None of the Coast Guard crewmembers was injured.

About 2 weeks later, on December 20, 2009, at 1740 Pacific standard time, the Coast Guard shore-based response boat *CG 33118*, carrying five crewmembers, collided with a 24-foot recreational vessel carrying 13 passengers in the harbor of San Diego, California. The annual boating Parade of Lights was in progress at the time of the accident. *CG 33118* was responding to a report of a grounded vessel. The collision resulted in the death of one child and serious injury to four other passengers on the recreational vessel. None of the crewmembers on the *CG 33118* was injured.

¹ Defined as a Coast Guard “vessel less than 65 feet in length that is assigned to a multi-mission station or marine safety unit” (“Response Boats 2010—The Shore-Based Response Boat Strategic Vision and Transition Plan,” Commandant Instruction 16114.20 [Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation, U.S. Coast Guard, October 31, 2001]).

Both accidents are still under investigation, and no determination of causal or contributing factors has yet been reached. The NTSB has learned, however, that some crewmembers on each Coast Guard accident vessel had been using cellular telephones to engage in text-messaging activities or conversations that were unrelated to vessel operations or to the mission at hand. The use of cellular telephones and other wireless devices has been proven to be visually, manually, and cognitively distracting.² The Coast Guard considers all crewmembers on small boats to be lookouts while the boats are under way.³

According to existing Coast Guard directives, coordination between boat crew team members is an essential element of risk management and safe vessel operation.⁴ The team approach to safe navigation requires the clear, frequent, and accurate exchange of information between all crewmembers relative to the safe operation of the vessel. The use of a cellular telephone or other wireless device for personal communication or for activity unrelated to operations could impede the exchange of vital operational information as well as delay reaction time. And as has been shown by recent NTSB findings from accidents in other transportation modes, the use of cellular telephones and other wireless devices can degrade performance, slow response times, and increase attention lapses of those in safety-sensitive positions.⁵

A recent executive order signed by President Obama prohibits text messaging by federal employees, including contractors, when driving government vehicles, when driving privately owned vehicles on government business, or when using electronic equipment supplied by the government while driving. The order directs all agencies of the executive branch to consider new rules and programs for prohibiting text messaging while driving and to educate federal employees about the safety risks associated with text messaging while behind the wheel.⁶ According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 30 states and the District of Columbia have banned texting while driving, and 9 states plus the District of Columbia have banned the

² For research information, see U.S. Department of Transportation website on distracted driving <www.distraction.gov>.

³ “Boat Crew Duties and Responsibilities,” chap. 1 in *Boat Crew Seamanship Manual*, Commandant Instruction M16114.5C (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard, September 2003), pp. 1-8.

⁴ “Team Coordination and Risk Management,” chap. 4 in *Boat Crew Seamanship Manual*.

⁵ For more information, see (a) *Ford Explorer Sport Collision with Ford Windstar Minivan and Jeep Grand Cherokee on Interstate 95/495 near Largo, Maryland, on February 1, 2002*, Highway Accident Report NTSB/HAR-03/2 (Washington, DC: National Transportation Board, 2003) <<http://www.nts.gov/publictn/2003/HAR0302.pdf>>; (b) *Collision of Two Burlington Northern Santa Fe Freight Trains Near Clarendon, Texas, May 28, 2002*, Railroad Accident Report NTSB/RAR-03/1 (Washington, DC: National Transportation Safety Board, 2003) <<http://www.nts.gov/publictn/2003/RAR0301.pdf>>; (c) *Motorcoach Collision With the Alexandria Avenue Bridge Overpass, George Washington Memorial Parkway, Alexandria, Virginia, November 14, 2004*, Highway Accident Report NTSB/HAR-06/4 (Washington, DC: National Transportation Safety Board, 2006) <<http://www.nts.gov/publictn/2006/HAR0604.pdf>>; (d) *Collision of Metrolink Train 111 with Union Pacific Train LOF65-12, Chatsworth, California, September 12, 2008*, Rail Accident Report NTSB/RAR-10/1 (Washington, DC: National Transportation Safety Board, 2010) <<http://www.nts.gov/publictn/2010/RAR1001.pdf>>; and (e) *Loss of Control on Approach, Colgan Air, Inc., Operating as Continental Connection Flight 3407, Bombardier DHC-8-400, N200WQ, Clarence Center, New York, February 12, 2009*, Aircraft Accident Report NTSB/AAR-10/1 (Washington, DC: National Transportation Safety Board, 2010) <<http://www.nts.gov/publictn/2010/AAR1001.pdf>>.

⁶ Executive Order 13513, “Federal Leadership on Reducing Text Messaging While Driving,” October 1, 2009 (*Federal Register*, vol. 75, no. 192, October 6, 2009, pp. 51225-51227).

use of hand-held cellular telephones while driving.⁷ In January 2010, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation announced that published regulatory guidance prohibiting texting by drivers of commercial vehicles such as large trucks and buses would go into effect immediately.⁸

The Coast Guard has issued several directives to Coast Guard employees concerning motor vehicle use and distractions, including cellular telephones.⁹ The NTSB believes that the lessons learned from previous accidents and the preventive measures in place to prohibit distracted driving can be incorporated, as appropriate, into existing Coast Guard guidance governing crew training, seamanship, and cutter and boat operations, as well as into the guidance and directives that the Coast Guard disseminates to the maritime industry as a whole. The Coast Guard's July 16, 2010, ALCOAST message 382/10, "Boat Forces Cell Phone/Texting Device Policy," represents a first step in this regard. However, to achieve the intended improvement in safety, the NTSB believes that the Coast Guard must systematically identify the specific risks associated with distraction while using a cell phone or other wireless electronic device during vessel operations and address those risks in its policies.

As a backup tool in the event of loss of radio communications, the value of a cellular telephone is widely recognized by the maritime community. However, the NTSB believes that to reduce distraction and improve the operational safety of vessels, the use of cellular telephones and other wireless devices by individuals in safety-related positions should be strictly limited during vessel operations. The NTSB therefore recommends that the Coast Guard take the following action:

Develop and implement national and local policies that address the use of cellular telephones and other wireless devices aboard U.S. Coast Guard vessels. (M-10-2)

Issue a safety advisory to the maritime industry that (1) promotes awareness of the risk posed by the use of cellular telephones and other wireless devices while operating vessels and (2) encourages the voluntary development of operational policies to address the risk. (M-10-3)

We urge you to take action on the safety recommendations in this letter. The NTSB would appreciate a response from you within 90 days addressing the actions you have taken or intend to take to implement our recommendations. In your response, please refer to Safety Recommendations M-10-2 and -3. If you would like to submit your response electronically rather than in hard copy, you may send it to the following e-mail address: correspondence@ntsb.gov. If your response includes attachments that exceed 5 megabytes, please e-mail us asking for instructions on how to use our secure mailbox procedures. To avoid

⁷ <http://www.iihs.org/laws/cellphonelaws.aspx>, accessed August 4, 2010.

⁸ *Federal Register*, vol. 75, no. 17 (January 27, 2010), p. 4305.

⁹ For example, "Texting While Operating a Motor Vehicle General Order," ALCOAST [Coast Guard-wide] message 012/10, January 11, 2010; and "Motor Vehicle Safety," chap. 10 in *Safety and Environmental Health Manual*, Commandant Instruction M5100.47 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard).

confusion, please use only one method of submission (that is, do not submit both an electronic copy and a hard copy of the same response letter).

Chairman HERSMAN, Vice Chairman HART, and Members SUMWALT, ROSEKIND, and WEENER concurred in these recommendations.

[Original Signed]

By: Deborah A.P. Hersman
Chairman