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Operations and Services

Voluntary Observing Ship Program, NWSPD 10-23

VOLUNTARY OBSERVING SHIP (VOS) PROGRAM

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SUMMARY OF REVISIONS:

1. This instruction supersedes NWSI 10-201, dated April 19, 2004. Directive numbering reclassified as per W/OPS.
2. Section 3.1.c first sentence: Changed “Ships shall not be recruited...” to “Ships will not be recruited...”.
3. Section 3.1.c last sentence: Changed “...and a physical on-board visit shall be made...” to “...and a physical on-board visit will be made...”.

Signed

November 2, 2009

Mark S. Paese

Date

Director, Office of Operational Systems

VOLUNTARY OBSERVING SHIP PROGRAM

<u>Table of Contents:</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Purpose.....	3
2. Mission.....	3
3. Port Meteorological Officer.....	4
3.1. Ship Selection and Recruitment.....	4
4. Ship Classification	4
4.1. Selected.....	5
4.2. Supplementary.....	5
4.3. Voluntary Observing Ship Climate Project	5
4.4. Auxiliary	5
5. Ship Visitation and Support.....	5
5.1. Timing of Visits	5
5.2. Purpose of Visits.....	5
5.3. Visit Routine	6
5.3.1. Instructions on Observation Techniques.....	6
5.3.2. Instrument Quality Checks.....	6
5.3.3. Explanation of Use of NWS Forecast Services	6
5.3.4. Visitation Services to Foreign Ships	7
5.3.5. Visitation Services to U.S. Government and Private Research Ships.....	7
6. NWS Instruments Installed Aboard Ships	7
7. Observational Aids and Marine Publications Provided to Voluntary Observing Ships	7

8.	Observation Procedures and Transmission and Disposition of NWS Forms by Ships	8
8.1.	Observation Procedures Onboard Voluntary Observing Ships	8
8.2.	Voluntary Observing Ship Observations.....	8
8.3.	Disposition of Weather Records by Ships.....	8
8.4.	Call Sign Masking Security.....	9
9.	Port Meteorological Officer Liaison Activities	9
9.1.	Marine Weather Training by PMOs	9
9.2.	Merchant Marine Schools	9
10.	Familiarization Trips.....	9
10.1.	Duties While on Familiarization Trips	9
11.	Awards for Voluntary Observing Ships.....	10

1. Purpose. The Voluntary Observing Ship (VOS) program is one of the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Weather Service’s (NWS) sources of marine weather data from coastal, offshore, high seas areas and the Great Lakes.

2. Mission. The mission of the VOS is two-fold:

a. to collect and disseminate critical real-time maritime weather observations through the recruitment and support of ships to fulfill National needs and International agreements supporting commerce, forecasts and warning programs, and the Safety Of Life At Sea (SOLAS) worldwide; and

b. to define the global climate and help measure extreme weather events, climate variability, and long-term climate changes.

Merchant ships participating in the U.S.-managed portion of the VOS program are recruited by Port Meteorological Officers (PMO). NWS VOS program vessels are asked to take observations at standard synoptic times (0000, 0600, 1200 and 1800 Universal Time Coordinated) while at sea. Additional reports are requested at 3 hourly intervals when within 300 nautical miles of named tropical storms or hurricanes and when within 200 nautical miles of the U.S., Mexican and Canadian coasts.

The collection of marine reports from the Great Lakes, Gulf of Mexico, western North Atlantic Ocean, and north and south Pacific Oceans is a coordinated effort between the Department of Commerce's NOAA/NWS, and the Department of Transportation's U.S. Coast Guard (USCG). The International Maritime Satellites play a critical role in the data collection process. Three NWS regions (Eastern, Southern, and Western) have full time PMOs while the other three NWS regions (Alaska, Central, and Pacific) have part time PMOs.

3. Port Meteorological Officer. PMOs are located in major U.S. seaports. They are responsible for (1) recruiting ships, (2) training ships' officers in weather observing procedures and practices, (3) checking and calibrating shipboard instrumentation, (4) maintaining the quality of ships' observations [Quality Control (QC)], (5) organizing and maintaining liaison with maritime interests, and (6) assisting NOAA's Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research in executing their VOS Program.

3.1. Ship Selection and Recruitment. Vessels enrolled in the VOS program allow for a broad distribution of observations over all oceanic regions. Priority is given to recruiting vessels which operate where the United States has forecast and warning responsibilities. Special emphasis is placed on recruiting ships traversing data-sparse areas, off the main shipping routes. In any recruitment, the following points should be considered:

a. No ship is to be recruited as U.S.-supervised if it is already in another nation's program. Ships of Japan, India, Canada, United Kingdom, and other nations with active observing programs should be paid a courtesy visit and reminded of the U.S. high seas data requirements. Foreign flag vessels may be recruited into the U.S. VOS program if they are not participating and considered inactive in the programs of their own countries. Release of support requests to the other nations will be coordinated by the VOS program office.

b. The recruited ship is expected to call at a U.S. port accessible to a PMO at least every six months so that observing equipment may be inspected and loaned equipment can be retrieved if the ship is decommissioned, transferred to another route, or fails to adequately participate in the U.S. VOS program. Adequate participation for the purposes of the U.S. VOS program means the vessel submits a minimum of 400 observations per year or, in the judgment of the PMO, is submitting a sufficient number of observations consistent with the vessel's type of operation and area operating in.

c. Ships will not be recruited when there is little or no opportunity to meet the deck officers and discuss with them the quality and techniques for weather observing. Exceptions may be made where major U.S. shipping lines are concerned or when a visit to an interested vessel is not possible. All non face to face recruitments must have prior approval from the VOS program office. In such approved cases, forms, observing instruction and handbooks can be sent through the mail, and a physical on-board visit will be made by any U.S. PMO within three months of recruitment.

4. Ship Classification. Ships in the VOS program are classified under World Meteorological Organization (WMO) International VOS definitions, i.e., SELECTED,

SUPPLEMENTARY, VOS Climate Project (VOSCLIM), or AUXILIARY with sub classes to discern Automated Meteorological Systems.

4.1. Selected. A selected class ship is equipped with an NWS or shipping company-owned barograph, barometer and psychrometer, all of high quality and accuracy. These ships sail routes where they can be visited by a U.S. PMO at least every six months. This ship class is expected to take and routinely transmit weather messages in the FM-13 (WMO Format 13) synoptic code format while at sea.

4.2. Supplementary. A ship with at least a barometer and a thermometer of acceptable accuracy is classified as supplementary when it lacks a full complement of suitable observing equipment or it cannot be reached for routine visits. Supplementary ships transmit weather messages in FM-13 synoptic code format while at sea.

4.3. VOSCLIM. A mobile ship station equipped with sufficient certified meteorological instruments for making observations, transmits regular and timely weather reports, enters the observations in an International Maritime Meteorological Tape (IMMT) compliant electronic logbook and has a proven record of providing high quality observations. A VOSCLIM ship should have at least a barometer, a thermometer to measure Sea Surface Temperature, a psychrometer (for Air Temperature and humidity), a barograph and possibly an anemometer. In addition, a VOSCLIM ship must be inspected at less than six monthly intervals, the full range of metadata must be maintained in WMO No. 47, the full suite of digital images, sketches and drawings must be available, and the delayed-mode IMMT data must be submitted to the Global Collection Centers (GCC) (Completed by National Climatic Data Center (NCDC)).

4.4. Auxiliary. A ship with at least a barometer and a thermometer of acceptable accuracy which does not desire or cannot routinely report is classified as an auxiliary class vessel. Auxiliary ships transmit weather messages in FM-13 synoptic code format while at sea.

5. Ship Visitation and Support. This function requires the greatest amount of the PMO's time. Proper management of this activity is essential to the VOS program. The PMOs plan routine visits to (1) recruit new ships into the VOS program, (2) inspect meteorological equipment and provide observing instructions to ships already in the VOS program, (3) replace or make adjustments to previously installed NWS equipment, (4) instruct observers and provide necessary meteorological equipment to newly recruited ships, and (5) make courtesy calls on foreign supervised VOS ships. For further reference, visits will be classified as the physical face to face meeting onboard the ship. Additional support is then classified either by e-mail, telephone, radio, postal mail, or contact through an office and/or agent.

5.1. Timing of Visits. Ship visits should be planned for times when the greatest number of weather observing personnel can be reached to discuss observing procedures and the use of NWS products.

5.2. Purpose of Visits. Ship visitations are made primarily to (1) expand the existing VOS program, (2) maintain the quality of weather observation programs aboard ships, (3) furnish observing and reporting instructions and supplies, (4) inform ships' personnel about the

availability and use of NWS forecast and warning broadcasts and (5) to download any archived observational data for submission to the NCDC.

5.3. Visit Routine. The routine during a visit to a ship varies, but generally all visitations should begin with a call to the captain or the captain's designated representative to explain the purpose of the visit (follow-up, new recruit, or courtesy) and to request permission to carry out all the PMO designated functions.

5.3.1. Instructions on Observation Techniques. The PMO should visit with as many shipboard observers as possible. During the first visit on a newly recruited ship, instructions from NWS Observing Handbook No. 1, Marine Surface Weather Observations, should be reviewed with the observers. If observation records are onboard the ship, the PMO should examine them for coding and logging errors, or omissions and make tactful suggestions for correcting problems.

5.3.2. Instrument Quality Checks. The PMO should check all the weather observing equipment onboard the ship during the visit. NWS VOS program ships have barometers corrected to read sea level pressure. To correct to sea level, the portable inspection barometer should be brought to the bridge and the bridge height determined. The height correction is found by multiplying the bridge height in feet by the correction factor, 0.037 millibars per foot. The ship's barometer is then set to sea level pressure by adding the height correction to the inspection barometer reading. If the ship's barometer cannot be adjusted, a height correction (plus or minus) must be applied by the observer to achieve a sea level pressure reading. The correction should be entered on NWS Form B-13, Barometer Correction Label, and posted on or near the barometer face. Several barometer comparisons should be made to figure the proper height correction. Some large vessels, such as bulk carriers, ride either fully loaded or empty without ballast. Two different corrections should be provided for these ships since large changes in draft can cause considerable pressure difference. To maintain accuracy, the portable inspection barometer should be checked each day by the PMO before and after ship visitations.

Barographs should be checked for normal operation and adjusted to sea level pressure. Thermometers should be cleaned and columns inspected for separations. If necessary, the psychrometer muslin should be replaced. All defective NWS equipment should be replaced.

If the ship is equipped with an anemometer, the PMO should provide the ship with a wind plotting board and explain its use. The PMO should evaluate the wind system exposure and discuss the qualities of the instrument with the deck officers. Ship's officers should be encouraged to have their anemometers checked by a qualified technician at least semiannually and calibrated if necessary.

5.3.3. Explanation of Use of NWS Forecast Services. Discussion of radio facsimile broadcast schedules and products, as well as radio broadcasts of forecasts, synopses, warnings, and analyses, should be brought to the attention of the ship's officers. If necessary, shipboard personnel should be provided where to locate NWS forecast services and Internet websites as well as the instructions on the interpretation and use of these NWS forecast products.

5.3.4 Visitation Services to Foreign Ships. Ships recruited by foreign meteorological services or foreign ships not participating in any observing program should be visited by PMOs when time permits and visits can be arranged. The activities of the PMO on these ship visits should be the same as if visiting a vessel in the U.S. VOS program. The internationally approved Foreign VOS Inspection Form (VOSP001) should be completed and returned to the U.S. VOS Program Office for promulgation to the appropriate Foreign VOS management office.

5.3.5. Visitation Services to U.S. Government and Private Research Ships. Every effort should be made to encourage the cooperation of ships that sail under the following Government-sponsored programs:

- a. U.S. Coast Guard
- b. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
- c. Ships engaged in Government-funded research

Visitation services should be offered to all ships in the various categories listed above. Services to NOAA ships should be coordinated through National Ocean Service Marine Centers, National Marine Centers, and National Marine Fisheries Service Research Centers and Laboratories. Military Sealift Command (MSC) ships are supported operationally and logistically by the U.S. Navy as their observation reports are not publicly releasable.

6. NWS Instruments Installed Aboard Ships. The NWS can provide as a loan: (1) a barometer, barograph, and thermometer to ships of the selected class; (2) a barometer and thermometer to supplementary class ships; and (3) in special cases, a barometer and thermometer to coastal auxiliary class ships. In certain cases, U.S. VOS vessels will use NWS loaned automated weather observation equipment. In many cases, shipboard instrumentation is a mix between shipping company and NWS-loaned equipment.

7. Observational Aids and Marine Publications Provided to Voluntary Observing Ships
Forms, aids, and publications provided to VOS vessels may include:

NWS Observing Handbook No. 1, Marine Surface Weather Observations

WS Form B-81, Ship's Weather Observations

Automated Mutual-assistance Vessel Emergency Rescue/Shipboard Environmental (data Acquisition System) Electronic Logbook Software

Guide to Sea State, Wind and Clouds

Worldwide Marine Radiofacsimile Broadcast Schedule

Mariners Weather Log

Barograph sheets (WS Form 455-12)

Determining Cloud Type Poster

Beaufort Wind Speed Scale Poster

Any ship classified as inactive should have its NWS loaned equipment recovered for re-issuance to actively supporting vessels.

8. Observation Procedures and Transmission and Disposition of NWS Forms by Ships.

All voluntary ships are requested to take weather observations on a routine basis while at sea. These observations are encoded according to WMO and U.S. requirements and transmitted to selected shore stations for relay to the NWS. Completed weather observation forms, when required, are sent to the servicing PMO, who performs quality control checks of the coded data. In the case where vessels are utilizing software to encode observations and a digital archived record is subsequently transferred to electronic media, this media should be forwarded to the PMO for their quality control check of the coded data (requirement for paper copy is eliminated in this case). The PMO then sends them to the NCDC for archival and subsequent use in various investigations and studies.

8.1 Observation Procedures Onboard Voluntary Observing Ships. All voluntary ships are requested to take and record observations at intervals of 6 hours daily while at sea. Observations every 3 hours are requested from vessels operating within 200 nautical miles of the U.S. or Canadian coasts or within 300 nautical miles of named tropical storms or hurricanes. Observations every 3 hours are also requested when a ship is experiencing sea at 12 feet (Beaufort 6) or greater or winds in excess of 47 knots (Storm Force). Special observations are also made when specifically requested by a Weather Forecast Office, the National Hurricane Center, or the Central Pacific Hurricane Center or whenever the ship encounters weather conditions, especially those not forecast. These conditions can include ice, strong winds, high seas, tropical storms, etc., following the "International Convention on the Safety of Life at Sea" instructions. In the case where a U.S. VOS program vessel has installed an NWS loaned automated weather system, observations may be automatically sent hourly to the NWS.

8.2. VOS Observations. The VOS Observations made in accordance with NWS Observing Handbook No. 1, Marine Surface Weather Observations, should include, whenever possible, the meteorological measurements of wind speed, wind direction, and barometric pressure as well as the ocean measurements of wave height, wave direction, wave period, and sea surface temperature. Other measurements contained in NWS Observing Handbook No. 1 may be included and encoded in the observations.

8.3. Disposition of Weather Records by Ships. Shipboard observers should be instructed to forward completed observation forms (NOAA Forms B-81), archived electronic media, and/or barograph sheets (WS Form 455-12) to the closest PMO to the port they are routinely operating out of if not delivered to the PMO during a visit.

A supply of self-addressed envelopes will be furnished to ships by the PMO for mailing the forms and media. Requests for additional forms, supplies and services should be noted by the PMO receiving the request and handled as expeditiously as possible.

8.4. Call Sign Masking Security. Due to security or business concerns, shipping companies or ship masters can request that their call sign and location not be shared on any public website whether in real-time or not. The VOS Program supports such requests by coordinating with the NWS Telecommunications Gateway (NWSTG) and having the REAL call signs replaced with "SHIP" as its identifier. The REAL call sign observations are then only routed to the Ocean Prediction Center (OPC) for forecast model verification and development and to the VOS program office for proper statistical analysis. PMOs who receive such requests are to forward them the VOS Program Office for further coordination and implementation.

9. PMO Liaison Activities. Next in priority to ship visitations, the PMOs are responsible for maintaining close liaison with shipping company officials, the U.S. Coast Guard, and other marine-oriented organizations. Through these contacts the PMOs can gain support for the VOS program and determine the local marine communities' requirements for weather services. Important unfulfilled requirements discovered by these contacts should be brought to the attention of the Regional Headquarters point of contact and the VOS Program Manager for necessary action.

9.1. Marine Weather Training by PMOs. The PMOs are encouraged to provide training in weather observing techniques for shipboard weather observers. The purpose of the training is to provide the ship's officers with practical assistance in observing techniques and uses of the meteorological services available to the ships. Basic meteorology necessary for weather map analysis and interpretation should be included in the training, if requested.

9.2. Merchant Marine Schools. Since the majority of cadets at merchant marine academies will eventually serve onboard ships participating in the VOS, the NWS should provide them with meteorological assistance when requested and if resources permit.

10. Familiarization Trips. PMOs will maintain skills and expertise in meteorological observations and remain well informed concerning all marine meteorological services available to shipping. This requirement cannot be met by ship visitation and liaison alone. To fully understand the mariners and their challenges with regard to the VOS, all PMOs should sail onboard a cooperating merchant vessel at least once every 2 years. In addition, part time PMOs and marine forecasters with offshore and high seas forecast responsibilities are encouraged to take familiarization trips as time and resources permit. Arrangements for such voyages will be approved by the regional headquarters and with the permission of the cooperating shipping companies affected.

10.1. Duties While on Familiarization Trips. During a familiarization trip, the PMO, part time PMO, and marine forecaster should assist the deck officer in taking, encoding, and transmitting synoptic observations; discuss the weather broadcast schedules with the deck officers; and suggest that pertinent marine weather bulletins be copied. Using appropriate bulletins, the PMO, part time PMO, and marine forecaster should demonstrate plotting, drawing, and analyses of

surface charts and assist ships' personnel with any questions they may have. The broadcast analysis and forecasts should be checked for accuracy and consistency. A complete report of any problems or discrepancies encountered with these products should be prepared. Dates and times of all observations transmitted and shore radio stations that acknowledge receipt of the messages should be noted. This information should be included in a trip report completed at the end of each voyage and sent to the VOS Operations Manager and the appropriate regional point of contact.

11. Awards for Voluntary Observing Ships. To provide suitable recognition of long or especially effective service rendered by participants in the VOS program, awards may be granted. Awards are provided to ships, shipping companies and to individuals in the maritime community. Arrangements for presentation of awards will be made through the VOS Program Manager and the Regional Headquarters point of contact. When feasible, presentation should be made before a local, civic, or management group. The presentation ceremony should be adequately publicized. Newspaper clippings, pictures, and other pertinent information should be sent to the VOS Operations Manager for distribution to NOAA Public Affairs and for inclusion in the Mariners Weather Log as appropriate.