



Marine Safety Information Bulletin

United States Coast Guard
Sector Southeast Alaska
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Winter Boater Safety

Purpose: This safety bulletin is published to warn mariners of the potential increased risks that winter weather presents for vessels underway and moored to the pier.

Background: In recent years Coast Guard Sector Southeast Alaska has responded to multiple incidents on both commercial and recreation vessels involving capsizing under heavy snow loads, breaking free from moorings, and catching fire from diesel-fired stoves and heaters. Additionally, the Coast Guard has investigated tragic injuries and deaths stemming from carbon monoxide in vessel cabins.

Heavy snow and freezing temperatures:

The Coast Guard reminds mariners to remove excess snow and ice from vessels. Accumulation of snow and ice on a vessel can reduce stability and cause the vessel to sink. Ice and snow can clog cockpit drains, causing additional weight loads that can push the waterline over scuppers and through-hulls. A common cause of harbor sinking is frozen and subsequently cracked through-hull fittings.



Additionally, icing in bilges can create obstructions that prevent dewatering systems from operating properly. It is critical for mariners to wear the appropriate personal protective equipment, including a life jacket, when removing snow and ice during the winter months, regardless of whether at the dock or underway. Vessel owners should note that they may be financially liable for pollution caused by their vessels incidental to sinking. For all incidents involving pollution discharge in the water, contacting the National Response Center at 1 (800) 424-8802 is mandatory.

Break-aways: High winds can part mooring lines, damage cleats or drag anchors. Frequently inspect and secure lines, adding extra lines or fenders as needed. Consult National Weather Service forecasts regularly and ensure your vessel is properly secured ahead of storms.

Best Practices for Winter Weather

- Remove snow and ice accumulation regularly, especially before high impact snow events
- Perform routine vessel checks to ensure scuppers and drains are clear and dewatering systems are not frozen
- Check mooring lines and cleats carefully before and during winter high wind events
- Verify and update owner contact information with the harbor or marina

Fire Hazards: The Coast Guard has investigated many vessel fires attributed to unattended diesel-fired stoves and heaters. Shutting down diesel-fired stoves and heaters when unattended is highly recommended. Furthermore, these appliances should be installed in accordance with manufacturer's installation requirements, including maintaining safety clearances from combustible materials. Installation of a fusible link and/or high temperature shut-off kits are also best practices. These devices detect over-heating conditions and activate shut-off valves, preventing additional oil from entering the burner after a fire has ignited. Changes in wind direction and temperature, as well as fluctuations in oil viscosity and quality, will affect stove operation and may create a hazardous condition. Poorly ventilated stoves can cause un-burned fuel to flood the stove. Any change in draft or gusty winds may fan the flame and ignite the excess fuel. These possibilities underscore the importance of shutting down unattended stoves. In addition to stoves and heaters, overloaded electrical outlets, drained batteries and faulty charging connections can also cause fires during winter months.

Carbon Monoxide Hazards: Carbon-monoxide poisoning caused by poorly ventilated stoves and heaters can be a silent and deadly killer during winter months. Installing a carbon monoxide alarm may prevent serious injury and death.

Best Practices for Winter Fire Safety

- Verify stove and heater installation is in accordance with manufacturer's manual
- Test the draft on your stove in accordance with manufacturer's manual
- Clean the stove or heater's internal and external surfaces and burner in accordance with manufacturer's manual
- Clean fuel lines and replace fuel filters as necessary
- Ensure all fire protection and detection systems, including portable fire extinguishers, are properly maintained and installed in accordance with manufacturer's manual
- Inspect your electrical system and make sure it is suitable for heavier winter loads
- Become familiar with carbon-monoxide poisoning risks and install a carbon monoxide alarm



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