

NAVIGATION SAFETY WORK GROUP

From: Captain Bruce Horton, Work Group Chair
Subject: Recommended addition to Harbor Safety Plan addressing best practices for vessels 1600GT and greater during severe weather conditions
Date: December 12, 2008

Introduction

The winter months from November to February typically bring storm systems to the Bay area that result in high winds and adverse sea conditions. Winds shift frequently and have a wide range of speeds dependent on the procession of offshore high and low pressure systems. The strongest winds tend to come from the Southeast to Southwest ahead of a cold front. Extreme wind conditions of 50 knots gusting to 75 knots have occurred during the winter, occasionally requiring the San Francisco Bar to be closed to vessel traffic.

The Navigation Safety Work Group met November 7th and December 12th, 2008 to develop best practices during severe weather conditions for vessels 1600GT and greater, including a standard for shutting down the San Francisco Bar and opening it back up once conditions improved. The best practices are meant to serve as guidelines, and are not meant to relieve the mariner of his or her responsibility to follow applicable rules and regulations addressing prudent seamanship.

Factors to consider when closing the Bar or limiting transits in the Bay

A number of factors must be considered when limiting transits in the Bay or closing the Bar due to severe weather, including sea state, tidal influences, visibility, traffic density, and wind advisories issued by NOAA. The size, class and condition of the vessels being addressed must also be considered. The Navigation Safety Workgroup recommends a tiered approach, applying greater caution as conditions worsen.

Sustained winds exceeding 25 knots in the Bay

- Vessels should closely evaluate whether it is safe to transit in the Bay. Size, class and sail area of the vessel, tidal influences, visibility, and traffic density should all be considered.
- VTS San Francisco will establish regular communications with bridge watches of VTS users in Bay Area anchorages, and more closely monitor swing circles to ensure vessels are not drifting.

Sustained winds exceeding 40 knots in the Bay

- Transits to and from berths are not recommended.

Sustained winds exceeding 40 knots and/or seas exceed 12 ft at the Sea Buoy

- Bar traffic restrictions and closure should be considered. Size and class of the vessel, draft, swell period, tidal influences, visibility, and traffic density should all

be considered. Strong ebb tides should be avoided, and a minimum of 10 feet under-keel clearance is recommended.

Procedures for Closing the Bar or Restricting Bar Traffic

- Bar closures are exercised on a situational basis without specifically defined weather or security conditions.
- The last Pilot over the Bar, inbound or outbound, shall make the recommendation to the dispatcher that the Bar should be considered for closure, or traffic limited to one-way traffic.
- In the event that the station boat is “boarded off”, then the station boat captain will make the recommendation to the dispatcher.
- The dispatcher will then notify the Operations Pilot, who will notify the Port Agent.
- The Operations Pilot or Port Agent will then notify the U.S. Coast Guard VTS and Command Duty Officer at the Sector San Francisco Command Center.
- The Captain of the Port will consult with the Operations Pilot or Port Agent prior to closing the bar under Captain of the Port authority. The Coast Guard will then issue a Marine Safety Information Bulletin communicating the closure or traffic restriction.
- The procedure for lifting traffic restrictions or re-opening the Bar will be the same as that for restricting traffic or closing the Bar.

Recommendations to Harbor Safety Committee

The Navigation Safety Workgroup recommends approval of these guidelines and their addition to the Harbor Safety Plan. The workgroup also recommends that the Captain of the Port document bar closures in the monthly Harbor Safety Committee Coast Guard Report, including the different factors considered and the weather conditions at the time of closure.