

TUG ESCORT WORK GROUP

From: Work Group Chair
Subject: Recommended addition to Harbor Safety Plan addressing best practices for tugs with tows during severe weather conditions
Date: February 12, 2009

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 tug and tow traffic.

The Tug Escort Work Group met January 15, 2009 to develop best practices during severe weather conditions for tugs and tugs with tows. 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. Furthermore, they are designed to address vessels in the service of routine cargo transport, and are not meant to prohibit tug rescue or salvage operations.

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 and condition of the vessels being addressed must also be considered. The Tug Escort Work Group recommends a tiered approach, applying greater caution as conditions worsen.

Sustained winds exceeding 25 knots in the Bay

- Tugs with tows should closely evaluate whether it is safe to transit in the Bay. Size and sail area of the vessel, tidal influences, visibility, operator skill 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 dragging.

Sustained winds exceeding 40 knots in the Bay

- Transits to and from berths are not recommended, but may be performed following a careful risk management evaluation by the vessel operator and vessel management.

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

- Bar traffic restrictions and closure should be considered for tugs and tows. Size 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.

Recommendations to Harbor Safety Committee

The Tug Escort 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.