

Federal Equipment Requirements for Boats

How to Comply With the Regulations

There are actually very few items you have to put on the average pleasure boat for it to be in compliance with Federal (Coast Guard) Regulations for safety gear. Most of us do a pretty good job when it comes to life jackets, horns, fire extinguishers, etc. And most boat builders supply boats with legal head installations, ventilation, backfire arrestors and navigation lights.

However, we suspect that many boats would fail a Coast Guard inspection or Vessel Safety Check for one of the following reasons:

- Omission of one of the plaques (which make up three of the required items)
- Omission of the Rules of the Road (which only applies to boats over 40' LOA)
- Out of date flares
- Not wearing mandatory PFDs

When you are preparing for the next boating season, make sure that your boat complies with Federal Requirements in the less obvious areas listed above.

Who Are the Regulations Aimed At?







The vast majority of boating in the U.S. takes place on relatively calm inland waters in small powerboats. Federal Requirements are aimed at this type of boating, which makes sense due to its popularity. For boaters who venture offshore or operate their boats in consistently rough waters, a necessarily higher standard is called for.

Some Advice

Regardless of how you use your boat, the following items should be considered first when outfitting your boat for safety:

- Buy comfortable, wearable life jackets with the correct dynamic strength rating, then wear them!
- Make sure your navigation lights shine accurately in the right direction, and do not cause a distraction for the driver (especially all-round lights on small powerboats)
- Buy and mount extra fire extinguishers: they're cheap and effective but only if you can get to them during a fire
- Carry double the number of meteor or hand flares required: they're cheap, and you'll be grateful if you ever need to attract attention
- Label the locations where safety equipment is stowed on board and familiarize your crew with the location of all items. This is especially true with fire extinguishers which may be hidden from view
- Use an Abandon Ship Bag to hold critical items in one convenient location
- Have a high-quality VHF radio aboard so you can summon help

Federal Equipment Requirements for Recreational Vessels

Boat Length in Feet	Less than 16' canoes, kayaks	16' to 26'(8m)	26' to 40'(12m)	40' to 65'(20m)	65' to 165'(50m)
 Personal Flotation Devices	One Type I, II, III, or V per person. PFDs must be CG approved, wearable by the intended user and readily accessible.	One Type I, II, III, or V per person plus one Type IV throwable. PFDs must be CG approved, wearable by the intended user and readily accessible.			
	Certain Type V jackets may have to be worn while the boat is in operation to count in the vessel's inventory of safety gear.				
 Fire Extinguishers No Fixed System With Fixed System	One B-I, any type. Fire extinguishers required on boats with enclosed engine compartments (not outboards), enclosed living spaces or permanent fuel tanks.		One B-II or two B-I.	One B-II and one B-I, or three B-I	One or more B-II (depends on the displacement of the vessel)
	No Portables Required		One B-I	Two B-I or one B-II	
 Visual Distress Signals	Night signals required when operating at night; dated within 42 months of manufacture date.	Pyrotechnic Signals: Minimum of three day-use and three night-use or three day/night combination pyrotechnic devices. Non-pyrotechnic substitutes: 1 orange distress flag (day-use) and 1 electric SOS signal light (night-use). Pyrotechnic signals must be dated within 42 months of the manufacture date on the label.			
 Sound Producing Devices	Horn or whistle recommended to signal intentions or signal position			One bell and one whistle or horn required to signal intentions or position	
Backfire Flame Arrestor	CG-standard system required on gasoline powered vessels with enclosed engine compartments built after August 1980				
 Ventilation	CG-standard system required on gasoline powered vessels with enclosed engine compartments built after August 1980				
 Navigation Lights Under Power Under Sail Rowing At Anchor Visibility Range	Sidelights, Stern Light and Masthead. Sailboats operating under engine power are considered power driven and must follow the "Under Power" rules. During the day, motorsailing vessels are required to fly a motoring cone. Boats under 20m can substitute a single bi-color light for sidelights. Boats under 12m may combine the masthead and stern light into a single "all-round" light.				
	Sidelights and Stern Light. Sailboats operating under engine power are considered power driven and must follow the "Under Power" rules. During the day, motorsailing vessels are required to fly a motoring cone. Sailboats under sail and rowboats under 7m and under 7 knots can substitute a white lantern or torch in place of the required lights. Boats under sail under 20m can substitute a tri-color light for separate sidelights and stern light.				
	Same as "Under Sail"				
	All-round light, 2nm (at night) or black anchoring ball (during the day) when outside a designated anchorage				
	1nm Sidelights, 2nm all others			3nm Masthead, 2nm all others	5nm Masthead, 2nm others
Pollution Regulation	"Honor system" (no plaques required)	5' x 8' Oil Discharge placard and 4' x 9' Waste Discharge placard. Vessels over 40' with a galley must have a Waste Management Plan.			
Marine Sanitation Devices	Vessels with installed toilet facilities must have an operable, CG-certified Type I, II or III Marine Sanitation Device (MSD). Subject to local laws!			Type II or III MSD only	
Navigation Rules	Familiarity with rules recommended, but not required		The Inland Navigation Rules ("Rules of the Road") must be kept onboard		

Additions to these requirements are prescribed by some individual state laws. Check your state's Boating Safety Handbook for a complete list.