

3.8 Watercraft

Safety Initiatives in Place Prior to Review

USDA WS Safety Directive 2.601 (dated 10/07/05) enumerates many of the safety policies of the WS Program. It states that supervisors will promote a safe working attitude among employees. Additionally, supervisors must also provide employees with adequate information, training, and personal protective equipment to optimize employee safety.

USDA WS does not currently have a directive on watercraft use. However, WS Directive 2.601 states that WS programs must adhere to state laws, this includes the operation of watercraft. Laws and requirements may that differ from state to state. Watercraft training in each state must meet guidelines set by the National Association of State Boat Law Administrators (NASBLA). This training requires either taking a hands-on class or successfully completing an on-line boater safety program.

WS state programs must meet the requirements set forth by NASBLA and the state. However, many WS state programs far exceed the requirements set forth by state law.

- Several WS state programs have state-specific directives/policies on watercraft use and safety.
- Several WS state programs require additional first aid and safety training for employees who operate watercraft.
- Many WS programs make recommendations from the state mandatory. For example, the state requires that there be a personal floatation device (PFD) aboard for every passenger. Some WS programs make it mandatory that you wear the PFD at all times while on the boat.
- Several WS programs require hands-on training on watercraft safety and lifesaving. These programs exceed NASBLA and are intensive programs approved by the US Coast Guard.
- WS programs have invested the funds necessary to ensure that the watercraft have all the safety equipment required by the state, and in most cases additional safety equipment exceeding state law.

Review Activities

Review of the WS watercraft use was conducted by the Maryland Department of Natural Resource Police (NRP). The NRP provides training to all Maryland residents operating boats in Maryland waters and to Maryland Wildlife Services boat operators. The Maryland NRP boating safety program is considered one of the best in the U.S. During the review, an NRPS Officer examined all WS Directives,

documents and manuals pertaining to management and operations of WS watercraft operations, training requirements and curricula and training records, safety procedures. The NRP officer also interviewed WS management and field personnel. The NRP conducted four inspections at WS state and district offices.

Summary of Review Findings

Wildlife Services employees use many different watercraft types, classification, and size to complete missions in a variety of environments on and near the water. These vessels include: one and two person kayaks, canoes, standard outboard motor boats, Beaver Tail long shank air cooled outboards, high power jet boats, and Jon boats. Operational environments include: the turbulent waters adjacent to huge hydro-electric dams, some of America's largest rivers and swamps in the Southeast, structures like bridges and ferry docks on the West Coast, the busy intra-coastal waterway, and floating marshes on the Eastern Shore. Wildlife Services employees often work at night, or at sunset. They may work alone, or sometimes from their own homes, resulting in supervisory accountability challenges. Many missions require lengthy trips to remote areas, work on shore in difficult terrain, and a return by boat late in the day or the next morning. Vessels are often loaded with equipment including beaver traps, poles, chain, pyrotechnics, and shotguns.

Maryland Natural Resources Police (NRP) reviewers visited several WS sites throughout the country. Interviews were conducted with supervisors and staff. The reviewers accompanied boat operators on site as WS personnel performed typical duties, examined safety equipment and vessels, and reviewed written policies. Without exception, the reviewers were treated cordially, and in a highly professional and open manner by all WS employees. The reviewers were impressed by the dedication to the WS mission and the concerns for safety demonstrated by all staff including supervisors. The reviewers wish to acknowledge the exceptional safety record overall of WS since its inception.

At most sites, reviewers found little or no written policies concerning basic safety requirements including use of personal flotation devices (PFDs). One notable exception was a state that had a policy stating: "that lifejackets must be worn while operating all types of watercraft." There were few written policies regarding certification of boat operators, inspection of safety equipment, checklists, or emergency procedures.

The basic WS safety requirement is that all vessels and operators follow those requirements established by the laws and regulations of the state in which they operate see appendix for WS Safety Directive 2.210. This is not sufficient in that the work environment of WS employees is far more hazardous than recreational boaters for whom state laws were designed to provide minimum safety requirements.

Priority Recommendations

The top priority recommendations made by the NRP reviewers were:

1. PFD use (actual wearing while underway) is mandatory at all locations.
2. Each site should obtain the styles and types of PFDs most likely to be worn including float coats, Auto Inflatable PFDs for hot weather, and comfortable vest style Type 3 PFDs.
3. Safety officers should be appointed for each district. These individuals, in cooperation with supervisors and managers, will develop, in final form, a written policy. This policy would include initial and recurring training, certification of boat operators, emergency operations, search and rescue, safety equipment inspections, float plans, accountability, and proper loading of equipment on the vessel.
4. Wildlife Services should purchase handheld GPS chart plotters (such as the Garmin Map 76 monochrome unit). Training, on the unit should be conducted prior to issue along with periodic refreshers each year.
5. Wildlife Services should maintain strict adherence to vessel placards in regard to weight and number of passengers on board.
6. Wildlife Services Safety Officers should obtain (often free from boater safety organizations) and post conspicuously signs, and safety posters. This sends a message that safety is important!