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MARINE SAFETY INFORMATION BULLETIN 02-04

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Wearing of Life Jackets and Life Jacket Storage and Accessibility

On Saturday morning, June 14, 2003, the M/V TAKI-TOOO proceeded across the bar at Tillamook Bay, Oregon carrying 17 passengers and two crew. During the bar crossing, a large wave struck the port side of the TAKI-TOOO, capsizing the vessel. Nine people, including the Master, are known dead and two are missing. The preliminary findings of the investigation indicate that **none of the nine dead wore life jackets**. Six of the eight survivors wore/or held onto a life jacket.

On Saturday afternoon, March 6, 2004, the water taxi M/V LADY D left Fort McHenry on its short run to Fells Point carrying 24 passengers and one crew. About the same time, a squall moved through downtown Baltimore and the Inner Harbor bringing choppy seas and severe wind gusts. The LADY D was only about 100 yards from shore, when the Master decided to turn back toward the dock at the fort. During the attempt, winds estimated at 45 mph flipped the vessel over, tossing all person onboard into the 44-degree water. Seeing the vessel in distress, sailors from the Naval Reserve Center Baltimore immediately boarded a landing craft and quickly retrieved the majority of persons. Despite the immediate assistance rendered, four passengers died, **none of which wore life jackets**.

As a result of these casualties, I recommend that small passenger vessel operators review the conditions in which they require passengers to don life jackets and review the distribution of life jackets onboard their vessels to ensure compliance with federal life jacket storage requirements.

Wearing of Life Jackets:

Title 46, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 185, requires the Master of a small passenger vessel to have passengers don life jackets when possible hazardous conditions exist. These hazardous conditions include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. When transiting hazardous bars or inlets;
2. During severe weather;
3. In the event of flooding, fire, or other events that may possibly call for evacuation; and
4. When the vessel is being towed, except a non-self-propelled vessel under normal operating conditions.

Donning life jackets when possible hazardous conditions exist may make passengers apprehensive, but this precaution can easily be explained as similar to wearing seatbelts during aircraft take-offs and landings and periods of turbulence. The wearing of life jackets is an added safety measure required for passenger protection. **The best time to don a life jacket is before it is needed – before people are in the water.**

The Coast Guard has entrusted small passenger vessel masters to use their judgment to determine when to require the passengers to wear life jackets. **If during a voyage, a Master has any doubt as to whether a hazardous condition exists, I expect the Master to err on the side of safety, and require the passengers and crew to don life jackets.**

Stowage of life jackets:

Title 46, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 180, requires that life jackets are stored in convenient places distributed throughout the accommodation spaces. Additionally:

1. Each stowage container for life jackets must **be readily available** and must not be capable of being locked. If practicable, the container must be designed to allow the life jackets to float free.
2. Each life jacket stowed overhead must be supported in a manner that allows quick release for distribution. If stowed more than seven feet above the deck, a means for quick release must be provided and must be capable of operation by a person standing on the deck.
3. Each child size life jacket must be stowed in a location that is appropriately marked and separated from adult life jackets so that the child size life jackets are not mistaken for adult life jackets.
4. The stowage locations of personal flotation devices carried in addition to life jackets must be separated from the life jackets, so as not to be easily confused with the Coast Guard approved life jackets.

Owners and operators of small passenger vessels should expect a close examination of the stowage of life jackets onboard their vessels during Coast Guard inspections. During these inspections, the Coast Guard marine inspectors will gladly answer any questions you may have regarding either the life jacket stowage requirements or concerning “hazardous conditions” and when life jackets should be donned. If upon receiving this bulletin, you have immediate questions; please contact my Domestic Vessel Program Manager, LCDR Jerry R. Barnes, at (904) 232-2640, ext. 178. He will be happy to assist you.

D. L. LERSCH
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Officer in Charge, Marine Inspection