



Your resource center for
BOATING SAFETY

U.S. COAST GUARD

Search:

Advanced Search

Home About Us Safety Regulations Recalls & Safety Defects Boat Responsibly Statistics NBSAC Grants Links

Publications • Boating Safety Courses • Boating Under the Influence • Carbon Monoxide Vessel Safety Check

Table of Contents:

[Introduction](#)

[Registration, Numbering, and Documentation](#)

[Law Enforcement](#)

Equipment Requirements

[Personal Flotation Devices \(PFDs\)](#)

Visual Distress Signals (VDS)

[Fire Extinguishers](#)

[Ventilation](#)

[Backfire Flame Arrestor \(BFA\)](#)

[Sound Producing Devices](#)

[Navigation Rules](#)

[Radio Regulations](#)

[Pollution Regulations](#)

[Marine Sanitation Devices](#)

[Vessel Safety Check \(VSC\) Program](#)

[Quick Reference Chart](#)

[Vessels Operating Offshore](#)

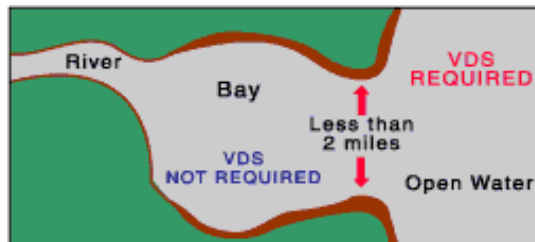
[Operating Procedures](#)

[Safety and Survival Tips](#)

Federal Requirements and Safety Tips for Recreational Boats

Visual Distress Signals

All vessels used on coastal waters, the Great Lakes, territorial seas, and those waters connected directly to them, up to a point where a body of water is less than two miles wide, must be equipped with U.S.C.G. Approved visual distress signals. Vessels owned in the United States operating on the high seas must be equipped with U.S.C.G. Approved visual distress signals.



These vessels are not required to carry day signals but must carry night signals when operating from sunset to sunrise:

- Recreational boats less than 16 feet in length
- Boats participating in organized events such as races, regattas, or marine parades.
- Open sailboats less than 26 feet in length not equipped with propulsion machinery.
- Manually propelled boats.

Pyrotechnic Devices

Pyrotechnic Visual Distress Signals must be Coast Guard Approved, in serviceable condition, and readily accessible.

- They are marked with an expiration date. Expired signals may be carried as extra equipment, but can not be counted toward meeting the visual distress signal requirement, since they may be unreliable.
- Launchers manufactured before January 1, 1981, intended for use with approved signals, are not required to be Coast Guard Approved.
- If pyrotechnic devices are selected a minimum of three are required. That is, three signals for day use and three signals for night. Some pyrotechnic signals meet both day and night use requirements.
- Pyrotechnic devices should be stored in a cool, dry location, if possible.
- A watertight container painted red or orange and prominently marked "DISTRESS SIGNALS" or "FLARES" is recommended.

U.S.C.G. Approved Pyrotechnic Visual Distress Signals and associated devices include:

- Pyrotechnic red flares, hand-held or aerial.
- Pyrotechnic orange smoke, hand-held or floating.
- Launchers for aerial red meteors or parachute flares.

[EACH OF THESE DEVICES HAS A DIFFERENT OPERATING (BURNING) TIME. CHECK THE LABEL TO SEE HOW LONG EACH PYROTECHNIC DEVICE WILL ACTUALLY BE ILLUMINATED.]

THIS WILL ALLOW YOU TO SELECT A WARNING DEVICE BETTER SUITED TO THE CONDITIONS WHERE YOUR BOAT WILL OPERATE?]

Non-Pyrotechnic Devices

Non-Pyrotechnic Visual Distress Signals must be in serviceable condition, readily accessible, and certified by the manufacturer as complying with U.S.C.G. requirements. They include:

Orange distress flag

- Day signal only.
- Must be at least 3 x 3 feet with a black square and ball on an orange background.
- Must be marked with an indication that it meets Coast Guard requirements in 46 CFR 160.072.
- Most distinctive when attached and waved on a paddle, boathook, or flown from a mast.
- May also be incorporated as part of devices designed to attract attention in an emergency, such as balloons, kites, or floating streamers.

Electric distress light

- Accepted for night use only
- Automatically flashes the international SOS distress signal: (... — — — ...)
- Must be marked with an indication that it meets Coast Guard requirements in 46 CFR 161.013.

Under Inland Navigation Rules, a high intensity white light flashing at regular intervals from 50-70 times per minute is considered a distress signal. Such devices do NOT count toward meeting the visual distress signal requirement, however.

Regulations prohibit display of visual distress signals on the water under any circumstances except when assistance is required to prevent immediate or potential danger to persons on board a vessel.

All distress signals have distinct advantages and disadvantages. No single device is ideal under all conditions or suitable for all purposes. Pyrotechnics are universally recognized as excellent distress signals. However, there is potential for injury and property damage if not properly handled. These devices produce a very hot flame and the residue can cause burns and ignite flammable materials.

Pistol launched and hand-held parachute flares and meteors have many characteristics of a firearm and must be handled with caution. In some states they are considered a firearm and prohibited from use.

The following are just a few of the variety and combination of devices which can be carried in order to meet the requirements:

- Three hand-held red flares (day and night).
- One hand-held red flare and two parachute flares (day and night).
- One hand-held orange smoke signal, two floating orange smoke signals (day) and one electric distress light (night only).

Pyrotechnic Device Examples



Red Flare
(hand held/day and night)



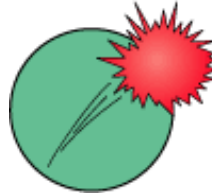
Parachute Flare
(day and night)



Orange Smoke Signal
(hand held/day only)



Floating Orange Smoke Signal
(day only)

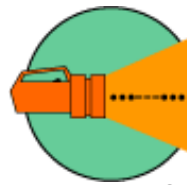


Red Meteor
(day and night)

Non-Pyrotechnic Device Examples



Orange Flag
(day only)



Electric Distress Signals
(night only)

All boaters should be able to signal for help. Boaters must have current dated U.S.C.G. Approved day and night signals for all boats operating on coastal and open bodies of water.