



Maritime and Coastguard Agency

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## KEEPING A SAFE NAVIGATIONAL WATCH ON FISHING VESSELS

### Notice to all Owners, Operators, Skippers, and Crews of Fishing Vessels

*This note supersedes MGN84(F) and should be read in conjunction with MSN1781(M+F) Distress Signals and Prevention of Collisions, MGN266 (F) Guidance on the Interpretation of SOLAS Chapter Five for Fishing Vessels, MGN 137 (M+F) Look-out During Periods of Darkness and Restricted Visibility and MGN 202 (M+F) Navigation in Fog.*

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#### Summary

This notice explains the need to maintain a proper navigational watch at all times.  
Key points.

- Watches must be kept by competent people;
- A Proper lookout should be kept at all times;
- Check the vessels position by all available means;
- The activities of all other vessels in the area should be monitored;
- Sufficient rest should be taken before a watch.

### 1. Introduction/ Background

1.1 Investigations into collisions, groundings and near misses involving fishing vessels have continued to show that poor watchkeeping is a major cause. In many cases one or more of the following were important factor(s):

- An unqualified or inexperienced person in charge of the watch;
- Only one person on the watch (regardless of whether a watch alarm was fitted);
- A poor lookout and/or radio watch being kept;
- Distraction by TV in the wheelhouse;
- Divided command;
- Fatigue, alcohol, prescription drugs or a combination of any of these.

### 2. What are the Arrangements of a Safe Navigational Watch?

2.1 Even where there is no statutory requirement for certificated officers, it is still essential that watchkeepers are always experienced, capable, and have been instructed in their duties. This is especially vital if you are making a landfall, navigating close to the coast, in restricted visibility, severe weather conditions or in areas where there is dense traffic.

2.2 While deciding the composition of the watch the following factors should be taken into account:

- The wheelhouse must not be left unattended at any time;
- The weather conditions, visibility and time of day. Although the size of the crew and the wheelhouse may not permit a continuous two person watch, two people should always be on watch during the hours of darkness and in poor weather conditions;
- The proximity of navigational hazards and any other hazards which may require additional navigational duties to be undertaken;
- The use and operational condition of navigational aids such as radar, echo sounder, automatic pilot, and position-fixing equipment(s).
- Any unusual demands on the navigational watch that may arise as a result of fishing operations.

### **3. Fitness for Duty**

3.1 Both the skipper and the watchkeepers should take full account of the quality and quantity of rest taken when determining fitness for duty. Particular dangers may exist when the watchkeeper is alone. It is all too easy to fall asleep, especially while sitting down in an enclosed wheelhouse. Watchkeepers should ensure they remain alert by moving around frequently, and ensuring good ventilation.

### **4. Navigation**

4.1 The Merchant Shipping (Safety of Navigation Regulations) requires that all voyages are planned, taking into account any relevant information, and courses should be checked before departure.

4.2 It is important that watch keepers maintain a close watch on their own vessel and always know the position, speed and course steered. Most groundings occur when the position is not being monitored and the watchkeeper thinks that the vessel is in safe water.

4.3 The watchkeeper should be aware of the location, operation and limitation of all safety and navigational equipment on board.

4.4 The person in charge of a navigational watch should not undertake any other duties that would interfere with the safe navigation of the vessel.

4.5 Unfortunately it may not be possible to rely on every give-way vessel to keep clear. It is therefore vital to monitor the movement of ALL traffic. Remember that a vessel engaged in fishing does not always have the right of way. In restricted visibility, even with gear extended, a fishing vessel has no special privileges.

4.6 Domestic radios, cassette players and television sets and other recreational items should never be used in the wheelhouse when they will distract a watchkeeper from their duties. The proper place for such items, especially television sets, is in the accommodation.

### **5. Navigational Equipment**

5.1 Watchkeepers should make effective use of all available navigational equipment and not hesitate to use the helm, engines and sound signals. The radar should be used as an aid. There is no substitute for keeping a good visual lookout.

5.2 It is strongly recommended that any automatic pilot fitted should incorporate a watch alarm. It is a good practice to extend the installation of a watch alarm to vessels not fitted with automatic pilot. A watch alarm should be fitted on board ALL vessels where there may be one person on navigational watch. The watch alarm will not only alert the watchkeeper but also other member(s) of the crew. However, a watch alarm should not be relied upon exclusively.

5.3 Over-reliance on video plotters has been a factor in several recent collisions and groundings. Using an electronic system does not remove the need for proper passage planning and navigation, using appropriately scaled paper charts.

5.4 Assessments or assumptions based on video plotters alone are dangerous and unreliable. A video plotter used for fishing purposes is not adequate for safe navigation.

5.5 If a video plotter is used, it is imperative to be aware of its limitations and a cross-check should always be made about the accuracy of your position, course and speed. Equipment of this type may be used as an aid to navigation, but it cannot replace the fundamental need to maintain a visual lookout.

5.6 Information, charts, routes and waypoints may be stored for future reference. However, stored data should always be checked and used with caution, especially if transferred between vessels. The data should be applicable to the vessel's specific condition and voyage, and always kept up to date.

5.7 Electronic magnetic compasses may be unsuitable for use within a steel wheelhouse.

5.8 Groundings have been caused by the improper functioning of this equipment linked to an auto-pilot. When a heading reference is required for navigational equipment such as an auto-pilot or radar, it is recommended that a transmitting magnetic compass (rather than an electronic magnetic compass) be fitted.

## **6. Navigational Duties and Responsibilities**

6.1 The person in charge of the watch should:

- keep watch in the wheelhouse, which should never be left unmanned;
- continue to be responsible for the navigation of the vessel, despite the presence of the skipper, until it is mutually agreed that the skipper has taken over;
- notify the skipper when in any doubt as to what action to take in the interest of safety;
- not hand over to someone who is obviously not capable of taking over the watch. If there is any doubt the skipper should be advised accordingly;
- on taking over a watch establish the vessel's estimated or actual position and confirm the intended track course and speed. Any danger(s) to navigation which is likely to be encountered during the watch should be noted;
- maintain a proper log of all movements and activities during the watch that relate to the navigation of the vessel.

## **7. Look-out**

7.1 It is absolutely essential that a proper look-out is kept at all times. Casualties to fishing vessels, resulting in loss of life, continue to occur because of the lack of a look-out. In addition to assessing the situation and risk of collision, stranding and other navigation dangers, the duties of the look-out should include the detection of other vessel(s) and/or aircraft in distress, shipwrecked persons, wrecks and debris, plus anything out of the ordinary.

7.2 The look-out must give full attention to keeping a proper look-out and no other duties should be undertaken which could interfere with that task. The duties of the look-out and helmsman are separate and the helmsman is not considered to be the look-out while steering except where an unobstructed all round view is provided and there is no impairment of night vision or other impediment. The watchkeeper may be the sole look-out during daylight hours provided that it is safe to do so and assistance is immediately available.

## 8. Weather Conditions

8.1 The watchkeeper should take early action to notify the skipper when adverse changes in the weather could affect the safety of the vessel, including the possibility of icing occurring.

## 9. Navigation with Pilot Embarked

9.1 The presence of a pilot on board does not relieve the skipper or watchkeepers from their duties and obligations. The skipper and pilot should exchange information regarding navigational procedures, local conditions and, the vessel's characteristics. The skipper should co-operate closely with the pilot. An accurate check of the vessel's position and movement should be maintained.

## Further Information

Further information on the contents of this Notice can be obtained from:

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