

U.S. Department of  
Homeland Security

United States  
Coast Guard



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## MEMORANDUM

OCT 3 2008

From: CHIEF, BOATING SAFETY DIVISION  
(CG-5422)

Reply to: CG-54221  
Attn of: JEFF LUDWIG  
(202) 372-1061

To: FILE

Subj: LEGAL DETERMINATION ON VESSEL STATUS OF PADDLEBOARD

1. The Director of the Oregon Marine Board has asked whether the Coast Guard considers a paddleboard to be a vessel for purposes of Navigation Rules, accident reporting, and safety equipment, i.e., personal flotation devices, carriage requirements (Enclosure 1). The Director reported that paddleboarding is a recent phenomenon in Oregon that started in the ocean but is migrating to inland waters. The sport involves a person standing on a board, similar to a surfboard and propelling themselves through the use of a paddle. In light of the increasing popularity of this type of activity, the State of Oregon is receiving requests from law enforcement officers on what laws/regulations apply to this device on the water. The Coast Guard has also received a request from a dealer of these types of devices in Michigan to clarify whether or not paddleboards should be considered "vessels".

2. In response to the request, we have researched the criteria used and guidance provided in previous Chief Counsel Opinions regarding whether or not a specified device was a vessel under 1 U.S.C. § 3 and used the typical criteria for preparing an analysis of this device (Enclosure 2).

3. Based on the information available, the Coast Guard has determined that, when beyond the narrow limits of a swimming, surfing or bathing area, the device known as a "paddleboard" is a vessel under 46 U.S.C. § 2101, and subject to regulations administered by the U.S. Coast Guard and its Office of Auxiliary and Boating Safety, unless specifically exempted.

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Enclosures: (1) E-mail from Director of the Oregon Marine Board via CGD 13  
(2) Parameters for determining whether a paddleboard is a vessel

Copy: CG-0941  
CG-5431  
CG-5413



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OCT 3 2003

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Subj: PARAMETERS FOR DETERMINING WHETHER A "PADDLEBOARD" IS A  
VESSEL

Below are the criteria adopted by the U.S. Coast Guard, utilizing case law and other references, to be used to determine if a certain device is to be considered a vessel for issues related to compliance with any applicable laws or regulations.

**(1) Whether the watercraft is "practically capable" of carrying persons or property beyond the narrow limits of a swimming, surfing, or bathing area:**

A paddleboard is "practically capable" of and intended to be used as a watersport activity beyond the narrow limits of a swimming, surfing, or bathing area. It combines traits of surfing and canoeing. In paddleboarding, a person stands on a large board which is stable enough to support a person standing while they paddle the device using a paddle in a manner similar to operating a canoe.

Paddleboard manufacturers depict this activity as multi-use, ranging from use as a "paddling" activity on inland waterways to a form of "surfing" in the ocean. For novices and the less thrill-seeking, using the craft to simply enjoy time on the water is becoming more popular.

**(2) Whether the useful operating range of the device is limited by the physical endurance of its operator:**

The operator of a paddleboard manually propels the craft through the use of a paddle. To a large extent the operating range is limited to the physical endurance of the operator, although because of its stability, the paddleboard could easily drift with the wind and water current. This potential physical endurance limitation is similar to that impacting sailboarding, canoeing, kayaking and other boating activities requiring higher levels of physical capability.

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**(3) Whether the device presents a substantial hazard to navigation or safety not already present:**

Paddleboards maneuvered across a waterway to locations where other larger and faster craft travel present a substantial hazard to navigation or safety not already present. Paddleboards are not as powerful or maneuverable as larger craft, and they are not as visible. The paddleboard user faces a similar hazard as users of a sailboards and canoeists/kayakers.

There are paddleboarding competitions in coastal areas and organized paddleboard excursions on inland waterways. Paddleboard "trails" have also been established, including one on the Deschutes River in Oregon that is 60 miles long.

**(4) Whether the normal objectives sought to be accomplished by the regulation of a device as a "vessel" are present:**

As a potential hazard to navigation or safety, regulation of paddleboards as vessels would meet the normal objectives sought to be accomplished by the National Recreational Boating Safety Program.

**(5) Whether the operator and/or cargo would no longer be safe in the water if the device became disabled.**

Paddleboards would provide a minimal level of safety to operators if they became disabled. Thus, the operator may no longer be safe in the water if the operator of the device became fatigued or disabled, or if the device itself became disabled.

**Conclusion.**

1 U.S.C. § 3 states that "The word 'vessel' includes every description of watercraft or other artificial contrivance used, or capable of being used, as a means of transportation on water." Given the answers to the questions above and the definition of the word "vessel" in the US Code, when utilized beyond the narrow limits of a swimming, surfing, or bathing area, a paddleboard is a vessel subject to regulations administered by the U.S. Coast Guard.