

Section 4.4

Firefighting Activities Policy

The Ports and Waterways Safety Act of 1972 (PWSA) (33 U.S.C. 1221 *et seq.*) acknowledges that increased supervision of port operations is necessary to prevent damage to structures in, on, or adjacent to the navigable waters of the United States, and to reduce the possibility of vessel or cargo loss, or damage to life, property and the marine environment. This statute, along with the traditional functions and powers of the Coast Guard to render aid and save property (14 U.S.C. 88(b)), is the basis for Coast Guard firefighting activities.

4.4.1 Overview

Traditionally, the Coast Guard has provided firefighting equipment and training to protect its vessels and property. Occasionally, the Coast Guard is called upon to provide assistance at major fires onboard other vessels and waterfront facilities. Although the Coast Guard clearly has an interest in fighting fires involving vessels or waterfront facilities, primary responsibility for maintaining necessary firefighting capabilities in U.S. ports and harbors lies with local authorities. The Coast Guard renders assistance as available, based on the level of personnel training and the adequacy of equipment. Coast Guard units do not normally have advanced firefighting capabilities. Firefighting requires technical expertise and a long-term training program to be done safely. Maritime firefighting is particularly hazardous on vessels due to closed compartments, HAZMAT, etc. The Commandant intends to maintain this traditional “assistance as available” posture without conveying the impression that the Coast Guard is prepared to relieve local fire departments of their responsibilities. Paramount in preparing for vessel or waterfront fires is the need to integrate the Coast Guard planning and training efforts with those of other responsible agencies, particularly local fire departments and port authorities.

4.4.2 Operations

4.4.2.1 Responsibilities and guidance. In accordance with Reference (y), primary responsibility for coordinating firefighting activities involving commercial vessels or waterfront facilities within their AOR rests with COTPs. *SMCs shall assume the responsibilities of the Incident Commander upon receiving a report of a fire involving a commercial vessel or waterfront facility that involves search and rescue. As the incident evolves beyond normal search and rescue actions, consideration shall be given to identify the appropriate firefighting authority with specific firefighting expertise. The discussion to determine the appropriate agency for Incident Commander or members of the Unified Command shall occur as the Incident Command is established. Once an initial Incident Command is established, SMC shall transition firefighting coordination to the firefighting authority.*

SMCs may direct firefighting efforts to save lives. If firefighting is being conducted for non-lifesaving purposes, consideration should be made to ensure it falls within the incident command structure.

Command Centers should refer to the Vessel Response Plan or Facility Response Plan to identify the planned firefighting agency. Reference (y) provides SRU crews with guidance on

firefighting equipment, extinguishing agents and procedures.

NOTE: The SMC has coordination and planning responsibilities for fires involving recreational vessels.

Reference (y) provides detailed guidance on responsibilities for coordination, contingency planning, training, and how to do firefighting involving commercial vessels or waterfront facilities. In developing a Coast Guard unit's assistance posture, the following needs to be considered:

- (a) threat level of fire;
- (b) the jurisdictions involved;
- (c) the capabilities of local fire departments;
- (d) the availability of Coast Guard equipment;
- (e) level of Coast Guard training.

4.4.2.2 Operations. *Coast Guard personnel shall be prepared for and respond to fires onboard Coast Guard vessels.* For all other marine firefighting situations, Commanding Officers of Coast Guard units shall adopt a conservative response posture. *They shall focus their actions on those traditional Coast Guard activities not requiring unit personnel to enter into a hazardous environment.*

- (a) **Independent firefighting.** *Coast Guard personnel shall not engage in independent firefighting operations, except to save a life or in the early stages of a fire to avert a significant threat without undue risk.*
- (b) **Commercial vessels and waterfront facilities.** *Coast Guard personnel shall not actively engage in firefighting except in support of a regular firefighting agency under the supervision of a qualified fire officer.*

NOTE: This term means a person who has been trained and certified, under National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) guidelines to take command of firefighting operations.

The Commandant recognizes the significance of the cautious approach the Coast Guard has adopted for marine firefighting situations. High training, equipment, and staffing thresholds will limit the response capability of many units, and in some areas, sources of support will not be readily available. Consequently, there will be occasions when a unit will be unable to mount a complete response to an incident. This circumstance is preferred to attempting a complex and potentially hazardous job without the necessary staffing, training and equipment.

4.4.2.3 Firefighting in an ICS response structure. If the Incident Command System (ICS) structure is used in responding to incidents involving fires on vessels or at waterfront facilities, a Firefighting Group should be established to coordinate local authorities responsible for fighting the fires. This should be coordinated prior to an incident.