

United States Coast Guard
Program Operations Division
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PROGRAM GUIDANCE FOR
DISPLAY OF VESSEL REGISTRATION NUMBERS

Several questions and issues have been raised concerning the proper display of state issued registration numbers on recreational vessels. Of the 185,000 vessels examined in 2002 under the VSC Program, 10,000 failed due to improper display of numbers. State marine patrol officers and Vessel Examiners (VE) for the Vessel Safety Check (VSC) Program have noted several problems in the field, especially with newer sportier designed vessels where the owners want their numbers to match the designs and color schemes of their boats. As a result, the Office of Boating Safety, as program manager, has been asked to provide program guidance on this issue. This letter serves to provide that guidance for Vessel Examiners of the U. S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, U. S. Power Squadrons, and the State providers for the Vessel Safety Check Program and state boating law enforcement agencies.

The manner in which numbers are to be displayed on vessels is prescribed under Title 33 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 173.27. The basic tenets of the regulation are, the numbers must

- 1) be painted on or permanently attached to both sides of the forward half of the vessel,
- 2) be in plain vertical block characters of not less than 3 inches in height,
- 3) contrast with the color of the background and be distinctly visible and legible,
- 4) have spaces or hyphens that are equal in width to a letter or number other than "I" or "1" between the letter and number groupings, and
- 5) read from left to right.

There are exemptions and exceptions for vessels operated by dealers for the purposes of demonstration, and for vessels due to their construction that cannot fully comply with the regulations as written.

The following is program guidance for applying the basic tenets as outlined.

The numbers must be painted on or permanently attached to both sides of the forward half of the vessel. Generally numbers are applied to the hull, but this is not required. Numbers may be applied to the superstructure or cabin sides, provided the placement is still on the forward half of the vessel. Self-adhesive numbers are accepted as permanently attached. Numbers may also be placed on placards or plates, and then bolted or screwed in place. Plates or placards may not be attached to removable stanchions or rails, nor may numbers be placed on glass windows, as they are not considered permanent attachment points.

Numbers and letters must be in plain vertical block characters of not less than 3 inches in height. They must be of a single color, not outlined, shadowed, or rounded, and appear in the manner as illustrated:

Some self-adhesive numbers may be a fraction of an inch off in height. Generally, the Coast Guard does not require the measuring of the numbers unless they appear to be too small. The rule of thumb used by the Coast Guard to determine proper height without measuring is, if the numbers can be read at a distance of 100 feet, accept them. If not, then measuring may be called for.

Numbers must be in contrasting color to the background and be distinctly visible and legible. If the background of the surface of the vessel is multi-colored or patterned (i.e. paisley pattern or product graphics), it may be necessary to block out an area in a single color to allow the numbers to be distinctly visible.

There must be spaces or hyphens between number and letter groupings equal to any letter or number other than "I" or "1". Numbers must read from left to right. These tenets are self-explanatory, and need no further clarification.

National standardization of examination and enforcement is vital to promote understanding of, compliance with, and continuity regarding the numbering regulations. It is critical that all Recreational Boating Safety partners (Vessel Examiners, State Law Enforcement personnel, and Coast Guard personnel) adhere to the same criteria and apply the same standard when conducting vessel safety checks.

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