

Stand-Up Paddleboards

What every user needs to know.

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With just under three million people in the United States trying stand-up paddleboarding (SUP) in 2015, paddlers have integrated SUP into literally all of our nation's waterways.¹ From paddleboarding miles off shore in the open ocean; to surfing a local beach break; to paddling in bays, lakes, ponds, and even on class III whitewater rivers; materials and skills are constantly evolving to meet the desire of an adventurous society.

As one of the fastest-growing outdoor recreational activities, there is a significant opportunity to educate a wide range of waterway users about this diverse craft that bridges the board sport and paddle sport communities.

Carriage Requirement

In a letter dated October 3, 2008, U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) officials, at the request of the Oregon State Marine Board, made a legal determination on the vessel status of paddleboards. In the memorandum, the officials determined that when it is beyond the narrow limits of a swimming, surfing, or bathing area, a paddleboard is considered a "vessel" under 46 U.S.C. §2101, and is subject to USCG regulations, unless specifically exempted.²

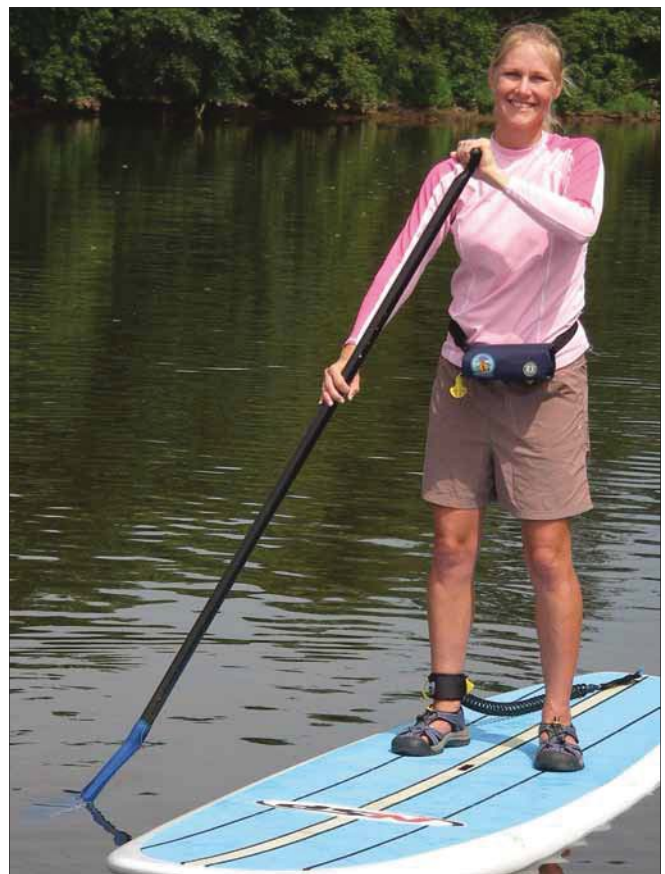
Since stand-up paddleboarding is a relatively new activity and has been given a vessel classification, it now must meet federal carriage requirements. However, Title 33: Navigation and Navigable Waters, Part 175—Equipment Requirements, Subpart B—Personal Flotation Devices in the Code of Federal Regulations does not adequately address carriage requirements specifically for SUP with regard to life jacket or leash wear.³

For example, imagine that when paddling on your local lake, you can meet one of the federal carriage requirements if you simply place a life jacket on your board. However, when you fall off, if you're not wearing an appropriate leash, you're in the water without any flotation device or connection to your board. Unlike a canoe or kayak that fills up with water when capsized, a SUP will just keep drifting away. If there

is even a little wind or a slight current, you might not be able to swim back to your board. Hence, wearing a life jacket and an appropriate leash would be beneficial.

That said, there are two challenges with regard to life jacket and leash wear for SUPs. It can actually be dangerous to wear a life jacket in surf, and wearing a leash in moving water or a swift-flowing tidal river could also be extremely hazardous.

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Proper equipment for a stand-up paddleboard, including an inflatable life jacket, a whistle, and a coiled leash. American Canoe Association photo by Christopher Stec.

Regulation Review

National Boating Safety Advisory Council

Through its Prevention Through People Subcommittee, the National Boating Safety Advisory Council (NBSAC) reviewed the CFR in 2013–2014 as to how it relates to stand-up paddleboards and other manually propelled vessels. As a result, NBSAC passed Resolution Number 2014-91-2: Safety Equipment Carriage Requirements: Manually Propelled Vessels and gave it to the U.S. Coast Guard.¹ Although this resolution did not definitively address every issue, it provided recommendations to the USCG on a range of topics for stand-up paddleboards and other manually propelled vessels.

1. Insert a definition of ‘paddlecraft’ into [CFR 175.3 Definitions] and then replace ‘racing canoe’ and ‘racing kayak’ with ‘racing paddlecraft.’
2. Replace ‘(b) Operating a canoe or kayak;’ with ‘(b) Operating a paddlecraft or raft;’ in [CFR 175.5 Exemption from preemption].
3. Exempt paddleboards and rafts of all lengths from carriage of an additional ‘Type IV’ ‘throwable’ PFD in [CFR 175.17(b) Exemptions].
4. Clarify the wording and intent of CFR 175.17(c) to clearly describe that this exemption only applies to racing shells, rowing sculls, and racing paddlecraft when competing in an organized or sanctioned race or training program approved by a national or international body, or by appropriate permit, and where adequate safety precautions are in place.
5. Continue to exempt stand-up paddleboards while surfing on a lake or on the ocean from the carriage requirements in 33 CFR 175.15 by adding the following language to 175.17: “Stand-up paddleboards, while in the surf zone of a lake or the surf zone of an ocean, are exempted from the requirements for the carriage of any type PFD required by 175.15.”
6. Structure the wording of these regulatory changes in such a way that future styles and types of manually powered vessels and craft would be included.

Since SUPs paddle on a wide range of waterways, they can also fall under the oversight of other agencies that do not necessarily have the same regulations as the USCG.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

For example, besides its military role, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is the nation’s largest provider of water-based recreation on public lands, and it has implemented mandatory

life jacket wear for all vessels at four lakes in Mississippi (for more information, see USACE article).

The following life jacket rule is one of several enforced at all four of the Vicksburg District-North Mississippi lakes of Arkabutla, Sardis, Enid, and Grenada:

“All persons must wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket at all times on powered vessels less than 16 feet in length or on non-powered vessels regardless of length.”²

New Mexico

Now, consider this regulation from the state of New Mexico’s Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources Department:

“Mandatory to be worn on all lakes and rivers statewide is a life jacket or PFD, a sound-producing device such as a whistle or horn, and a white light for shining at other boats at night.”³

The actual New Mexico regulation can be found in Title 18 Transportation and Highways, Chapter 17 Navigation and Boating, Part 2 Boating Operation and Safety, 18.17.2.9 Equipment Required to Operate a Vessel:

“... Persons engaged in boating on a river or in boat races or persons using ice sailboats, personal watercraft, kayaks, canoes, *paddleboards* and rubber rafts *on any waters of this state shall wear* a U.S. Coast Guard-approved wearable personal flotation device.”⁴

For more information on appropriate leash and life jacket wear for SUP, view the American Canoe Association information at www.americancanoe.org.

Endnotes:

- ¹ NBSAC Resolution 2014-92-02: Safety Equipment Carriage Requirements: Manually Propelled Vessels.
- ² U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mississippi Lake District Boating Regulations, www.mvk.usace.army.mil/Missions/Recreation/EnidLake.aspx.
- ³ New Mexico’s Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources Department (EMNRD), Stand-Up Paddleboarding website, www.emnrd.state.nm.us/SPD/BOATINGWeb/Paddle_Craft.html.
- ⁴ New Mexico regulation, Title 18 Transportation and Highways, Chapter 17 Navigation and Boating, Part 2 Boating Operation and Safety, 18.17.2.9 Equipment Required to Operate a Vessel, <http://164.64.110.239/nmac/parts/title18/18.017.0002.pdf>.



A paddleboarder navigates the rapids on the Rappahannock River in Virginia without a leash. American Canoe Association photo by Christopher Stec.



Whitewater surfing with a quick-release leash. American Canoe Association photo by Claudette Stec.

carriage requirements while in a surfing area. However, Minnesota guidelines have created issues near Duluth and the Lester River and Park Point surf breaks. From the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Boating Guide:

“A readily accessible and wearable life jacket is required for each person onboard a boat, this includes canoes, kayaks, stand-up paddleboards and waterfowl boats.”

Challenges Associated with Life Jackets and Leashes

According to the 2014 USCG Recreational Boating Statistics report, where the cause of death was known, 78 percent of fatal boating accident victims drowned. Of those drowning victims, 84 percent were not wearing a life jacket.

Arguably, wearing a life jacket is a wise decision while stand-up paddleboarding in almost all water venues. However, if you can swim (and I sincerely hope that those who paddleboard can swim), and if you’re actively surfing in the ocean, then wearing a life jacket would not allow you to dive underneath waves once you’ve fallen off your board. In addition, a life jacket would keep your head on the surface—right next to the board’s sharp fins and hard rails.

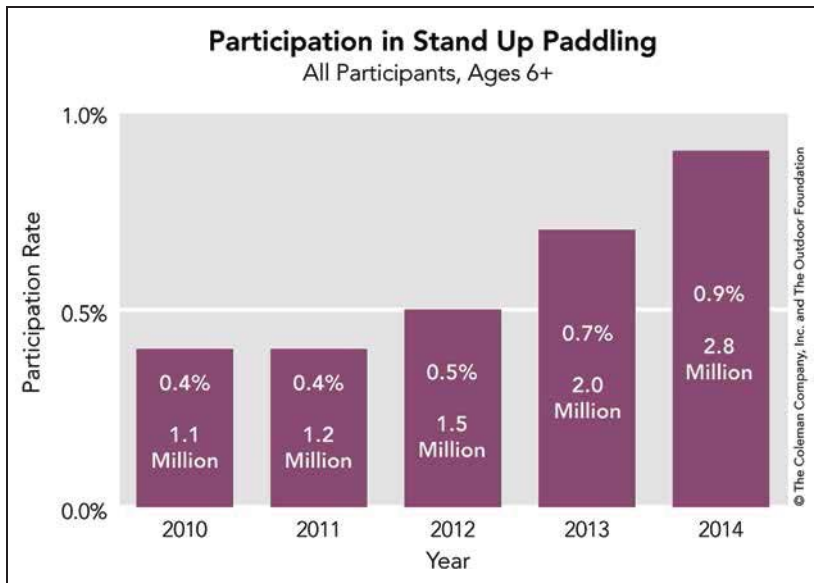
The 2008 USCG vessel determination for SUPs appropriately addresses this, as SUPs are exempt from life jacket



Paddleboarding in the ocean with a straight leash. BIC SUP photo courtesy of Ben Thouard.

So, according to Minnesota regulations, stand-up paddleboarders would need to either wear or have a life jacket on their boards while surfing in these areas in Lake Superior, whereas the 2008 USCG vessel determination letter for SUP states they would be exempt from the life jacket carriage requirement in this type of venue.





Since 2010, stand-up paddleboarding has experienced participation growth each year. Graphic courtesy of the Coleman Company, Inc.

Next, let's contemplate the complexities associated with leash wear for SUPs. Although leashes are extremely important in most venues, it would not be prudent to simply make a blanket statement to mandate leash wear in the CFR carriage requirement section.

It is a widely accepted practice that SUPs use coiled leashes on lakes and straight leashes in the ocean. A more challenging scenario is presented in tidal and inland rivers with swift-moving water: Imagine falling off your board. The board goes around a dock piling on one side while you go around the other, or the leash snags on a branch along a river. Wearing a leash in those situations could be extremely dangerous.

In another scenario, a stand-up paddleboarder starts out paddling in one lake, wearing a coiled leash, but then must paddle through a narrow, meandering river to get to the next lake. That individual would need to know that a coiled leash is appropriate for the lake, but would need to either remove the leash or wear a quick-release leash for the moving water river section to avoid potential entrapment hazards.

Even though there are a range of quick-release leashes that attach to your torso area, they too should only be worn in certain water venues. For example, if a river is shallow or rocky, or if there are a lot of potential snagging hazards from trees or debris, it is not generally recommended to wear any type of leash. However, if the river is deep, fast-flowing, and free from obstructions, a quick-release leash attached to your torso area might be prudent. If you fall into that river or tidal environment, you could quickly be separated from your board and have a long swim. However, even in that

environment, there are still risks associated with wearing a leash.

To summarize, in most venues, an appropriate leash is an extremely important piece of equipment. What's important is for individuals to be educated on when to wear a leash as well as what type is appropriate for the venue they'll be paddling on.

Next Steps for SUP

Due to the complexities associated with life jacket and leash wear, as well as the various regulations applied to SUP, education is key. Local, state, and federal regulators need accurate information prior to crafting rules and guidelines that affect stand-up paddleboarding.

Additionally, businesses that rent stand-up paddleboards should truly weigh the benefits of having customers wear a life jacket and an appropriate leash for the venue. Retailers should increase the sales staff's knowledge base with regard to the appropriate life jacket, leash, or leashes necessary for each board sale. Even law enforcement officers might consider how to best approach a SUP on the water. Ideally, they would approach at idle speed and ask the paddler to kneel down on their board well in advance of making contact in the patrol boat. Even the smallest wave or wake can cause a paddler to fall.

The most crucial step in reducing future fatalities for SUPs is to educate the public. If people don't know what they don't know, they cannot make an informed decision about which leash to wear in which venue, or about the importance of life jacket wear in almost all venues.

We encourage the entire recreational boating community to continue to partner to provide education to all groups associated with SUPs, that they may reduce the possibility of fatalities occurring while enjoying our nation's waterways on a stand-up paddleboard.

About the author:

Mr. Christopher Stec is the chief operating officer of the ACA | Canoe-Kayak-SUP-Raft-Rescue, the oldest nonprofit paddlesports organization in the United States, focusing on education, stewardship, recreation, and competition. He holds numerous instructor certifications and enjoys spending time on the water with his family, whether it's racing canoes, kayak fishing, or surfing SUPs in the ocean.

Endnotes:

1. 2015 Special Report on Paddlesports, Outdoor Industry Association, Boulder, Colorado.
2. U.S. Coast Guard letter to Oregon State Marine Board, 2008.
3. U.S. Government Publishing Office, online at www.gpo.gov.