

Stand-Up Paddleboard (SUP) FAQs

U.S. Coast Guard
Revised, July 2011

On OCT 3, 2008 the Coast Guard made the determination that “paddleboards,” actually Stand-Up Paddleboards (SUP) are considered “vessels” and subject to certain boating safety regulations. To clarify the issue for Eleventh District Units we've created this set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).

What is a Stand-Up Paddleboard (SUP)?

A “SUP” as they are called in the sport, is a surfboard-like device, usually thicker and longer than a standard surfboard, where the operator stands upright and propels the board using a long paddle.

Where am I likely to see a SUP?

The sport has grown tremendously in recent years so you will see SUPs in the surf, offshore, and on flat water lakes and rivers.

What was the Coast Guard determination?

The Coast Guard determined that SUPs were “vessels” when operating “beyond the narrow confines of a surfing, swimming or bathing area.” A vessel, according to 1 USC 3 “includes ever description of watercraft or other artificial contrivance used, or capable of being used, as a means of transportation on water.”

OK, but what does that mean to a boarding officer?

It means that if you see a SUP operating:

- A. In the surf or swimming/bathing area, leave it alone.
- B. On other waters, treat it as a kayak or other paddlecraft.

What boating safety regulations apply to a SUP?

Like any paddlecraft, a SUP operating outside a surfing or swimming area is subject to the NAVRLES, carriage requirements for PFDs, VDS, sound producing device, navigation lights, and accident reporting.

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What kind of lifejackets are required on a SUP?

Just as with other boats, children (12 years old and under in California) must wear a lifejacket. Adults must have one onboard. PFSs must be Coast Guard approved and either Type I, II or III.

Note: For people 16 years old and older, who can swim and are comfortable in the water, a good choice is an inflatable lifejacket. They are less cumbersome and come in suspender style and belt-pack style.

What kind of sound producing device is required on a SUP?

As with any paddlecraft, a whistle will suffice for a sound producing device.

What about navigation lights?

As with any rowboat, kayak, or other paddlecraft, the operator of a SUP need only carry a flashlight that can be shined in enough time to avoid a collision. They are not required to have installed navigation lights.

What about Visual Distress Signals (VDS)?

For boats in California, VDS are only required when operating offshore. If an SUP is operating offshore it would be required to carry VDS under the following circumstances:

- A. If the SUP is less than 16 feet long the operator need only carry VDS if operating between sunset and sunrise.
- B. If the SUP is 16 feet or longer, the operator needs to carry both day and night VDS anytime it is underway (33 CFR 175.110 (a)).

Do SUPs have Hull ID numbers (HIN)?

No. The Coast Guard waived that manufacturer requirement.

Do SUPs have to have registration numbers?

No. States in D11 do not require registration of paddlecraft (CA, AZ, NV, UT). However, other states might.

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What about “traditional” paddleboards that don't use a paddle but are powered by hand, kneeling or lying down like on a surfboard?

“Traditional” paddleboards have been around for about 100 years. This style of paddleboard is typically long, pointed, and does NOT use a paddle. The operator “paddles” with his/her hands like on a surfboard. These were not considered in the Coast Guard's “vessel” determination, which said, “The sport involves a person standing on a board, similar to a surfboard and propelling themselves through the use of a paddle.” Even if a traditional paddleboard had been classified as a “vessel” it would be exempt from lifejacket carriage requirements because it is powered by hand rather than “by machinery, sails, oars, paddles, poles, or another vessel.” (33 CFR 175.11)

Where can I find these regs in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR)?

Most recreational boating requirements can be found in 33 CFR, between parts 173 and 187.