

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Boat Collision Incident

Date: July 11, 2025

Location: Alaska

Avoiding Boat Collisions on Wildfire Assignments

Five firefighters working on the Ninetyeight Fire were injured in a boating incident in which the boats collided and the firefighters were ejected into the water. Three were transported to the Fairbanks Memorial Hospital. Two of those firefighters were evaluated and treated for potential head injuries and lacerations then released. The third was admitted to the hospital for further treatment.

Two firefighters did not go to the hospital and were treated and released on scene.

This collision between two watercraft has highlighted the urgent need for improved traffic coordination, communication, and visibility in boating operations.

Key Lessons Learned and Best Practices for Risk Management/Mitigation

1. Supervisor to Manage Boat Operations

When operating two or more boats, a dedicated point of contact should be assigned to oversee all water-based operations. Special considerations to consider for assigning oversight: Is boat traffic two-way? Is there civilian river use? What are the river conditions, including the width of the waterway? This ensures clear command and control over boat movements and reducing the chance of conflicting travel routes.

2. Clear Communication System

- ❖ If possible, implement a designated radio frequency for boat operations.
- ❖ Conduct check-ins and call-outs when departing, arriving, or passing key locations (such as base, drop zones, refuel points, river miles).
- ❖ Use standardized boat call signs. All operators should be briefed on communication protocols.
- ❖ **Equip boat operators with headsets connected to radios via adapters**, allowing them to clearly hear and transmit without taking hands off controls or over engine noise.
- ❖ Call in the blind (announce over the radio for all to hear) on dedicated boating radio frequency if anybody sees any general public boating traffic in the fire area.



Boats involved in the incident.

- ❖ Post fire information boards at surrounding public boat launchings to inform the public that there is an increase of boating traffic due to firefighter and cargo movement on the waterway.

3. Right-of-Way Protocols

- ❖ When two boats approach head-on, both vessels should steer to their right (starboard side) to avoid a collision.
- ❖ In narrow or blind turns on rivers, the downstream boat has the right of way over the upstream boat.

4. High-Visibility Lighting and Markings

- ❖ Boats should be equipped with high-intensity LED or strobe lights, especially for low-visibility or nighttime operations.
- ❖ Use reflective tape and signage to improve boat visibility.

Action Items for Future Assignments

- ❖ In pre-incident planning, include water operations traffic maps and assigned travel lanes.
- ❖ During the initial operational period, brief personnel on boating protocols.
- ❖ Conduct boat-specific safety briefings for new arrivals.
- ❖ Re-evaluate lighting and communication systems during the incident.

Conclusion

Effective supervision, communication, and visibility measures help to prevent boat collisions during wildfire support operations. Proactive planning and disciplined execution will enhance safety and mission success.

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