

America's Boaters

Help Watch Waterways

By Kimberly Hermes

Even with the various levels of law enforcement involved in homeland security, the role of the boating public and those employed in boating-related vocations remains significant in helping protect our nation from further acts of terrorism.

The eyes and ears provided by recreational and commercial boaters, marina operators and owners, fishing guides and others serve as a force multiplier in protecting our infrastructure. To capitalize on this invaluable resource, the U.S. Coast Guard, with cooperation from the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, the Department of Homeland Security and numerous federal, state and local agencies, has developed America's Waterway Watch (AWW), a national awareness program.

The Coast Guard and law enforcement personnel cannot see everything going on in marinas, on bridges, around locks and near other waterfront facilities – but the citizens of this country who are part of the boating community can.

AWW urges Americans to adopt a heightened sensitivity toward unusual events or individuals they may encounter in or around ports, docks, marinas, riversides, beaches or communities. Loosely based on the familiar "Neighborhood Watch" program, AWW is designed to educate the boating public, both commercial and recreational, marina operators and other waterfront concessionaires about how to detect and report suspicious activity.

Anyone observing suspicious activity is simply asked to note details and contact local law enforcement. Citizens are not encouraged to approach or challenge anyone acting in a suspicious manner.

Any suspicious behavior should be reported to the AWW toll-free hotline at 1.877.24.WATCH (1.877.249.2824). Any obvious emergency or situation on the waterways that requires immediate assistance should be reported to the local 911 system immediately. Or, if the observer is afloat, the situation should be reported to the U.S. Coast Guard on Marine Channel 16.

This number rings directly into the National Response Center. This center is a multi-agency facility managed by the U.S. Coast Guard that historically has been responsible for handling oil and hazardous materials spills in the maritime environment. After 9/11 their mission was greatly expanded. When someone reports what is believed to be suspicious activity, the information is preliminarily

analyzed by the National Response Center and then passed along to the appropriate federal or local agency.

Boaters are urged to listen to their gut instincts and call 1.877.24.WATCH to report anything suspicious. They should pay special attention to height, weight, clothing and other identifiable characteristics as well as vessel description.

To learn more about America's Waterway Watch, visit http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-m/mp/AWW_Website/.

The boating public and boating-related businesses help in the fight to keep our nation as secure as possible by assisting in three areas: awareness, observation and information.

"Awareness" is simply keeping up-to-date with the current national security threat level and any public notices that are distributed. This threat level system has been initiated to keep all U.S. citizens alert when information indicates that the potential for terrorist activity on U.S. shores is more likely. As the threat levels increase, all persons should be aware of the activities or potential targets in their community that could be targeted by a terrorist.

"Observation" is simply making a mental note of any activities or requests that are out of the ordinary. These may include any of the following:

- Suspicious launching or retrieval of vessels at unusually remote locations
- Vessels that tend to "hang around" in restricted areas
- Vessels operating at odd hours not consistent with normal fishing or boating activities
- Boats depositing suspicious passengers in unusual locations, especially at night
- Boats arriving from international waters which appear to bypass U.S. Customs
- Vessels loaded with unusually large amounts of extra fuel or 55 gallon drums
- Purchasing inquiries related to small commercial or fishing vessels by individuals who seem to lack industry knowledge, credentials, or trade experience
- Suspicious people attempting to rent watercraft without identification
- Suspicious persons photographing/making sketches around bridges, power plants, or other critical infrastructure
- Suspicious persons inquiring about arrangements and security for public events
- Unusual maintenance requests
- Paint scheme on a private vessel resembling that of a law enforcement or port vessels



All boaters are encouraged help keep our nation as secure as possible by staying aware while on and around the water. Boaters should report any suspicious activity they observe to America's Waterway Watch at 877.24.WATCH.

Photo courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

- Unusual training requests made at dive shops or seamanship schools
- Small boats maneuvering at high rates of speed in close vicinity of large vessels as if making practice runs

Any one of these activities alone does not necessarily mean that someone is engaged in an illegal activity, but witnessing these activities should cause a person to make a mental note of the situation.

The third area, "information," is twofold. Many boaters may not be familiar with areas that have been closed due to security concerns. Passing on knowledge of these restricted areas may help to make their time on the water more enjoyable.

The second part of the "information" aspect is making sure to pass on information pertaining to suspicious activities to the appropriate authorities. It is relatively unlikely that terrorists will prepare for their mission without encountering someone, and most likely that someone will be an "average" person. If "average" boaters do their part to assist in securing our nation's assets, federal, state and local law enforcement agencies will be much more effective at keeping another attack on the United States from occurring.

Editor's Note: Lt. Tom Tucker, boating education coordinator with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, contributed to this article.

