



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
OFFICE OF MARINE AND AVIATION OPERATIONS  
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910-3282

10 July 2017

MEMORANDUM FOR: NOAA Diving Control and  
Safety Board  
FROM: Roger Mays, NOAA Diving Safety Officer W.1365849125  
SUBJECT: Guidance to NOAA Diving Units and NOAA Ships on the use of Warning Signals  
during Diving

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DN: c=US, o=U.S. Government,  
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This memo provides guidance on the proper display of warning signals, specifically the red and white diver down flag and the international code flag Alpha. These warning signals reduce diving risk by alerting nearby boat traffic when divers are in the water and advising of the vessel's restriction in her ability to maneuver.

Section 4.2.9 of the NOAA Diving Manual requires divers to display a red and white "diver down" sport diving flag sized to meet local legal requirements for dives exempt by OSHA and a code flag "Alpha" for dives subject to OSHA which are conducted from surfaces *other than a vessel*. Both flags shall be displayed in a manner that allows all-round visibility both night and day. For OSHA dives, the Divemaster or lead diver may also choose to fly a red and white dive flag in conjunction with the Alpha flag.

The Coast Guard navigation rules (International/Inland) apply to *all vessels* operating on the high seas and to those vessels when operating on inland waters of the United States. The aforementioned OSHA requirement for diving flags is only applicable to dives being conducted from a surface *other than a vessel*. Therefore, dive operations performed from a NOAA ship, small boat, or vessel operated by a NOAA partner will comply with the Coast Guard navigation rules; specifically Rule 27 (72COLREGS). Whenever the size of the vessel engaged in diving operations makes it impracticable to exhibit all lights and shapes prescribed in Rule 27d, the vessel operator may instead exhibit the lights and shapes provided in Rule 27e; three all-round lights in a vertical line where they can best be seen (the highest and lowest shall be red and the middle light shall be white); and a rigid replica of the international Code flag "A" not less than 1 meter in height. Measures shall be taken to ensure its all-round visibility. Rule 27g provides an additional exemption to vessels less than 12M in length, eliminating the requirement for lights and day shapes.

Recent inspections revealed confusion about how to interpret rule 27. The Coast Guard Headquarters Office (Commandant CG-NAV) responsible for overseeing and enforcing the navigation rules has provided an official response:

*"It is clear from the archives (legislative history, Federal Safety Advisory Committee reports, executive decision memos) that Rule 27(e)(ii) is referring to the flag's size/dimensions."*

When diving from boats and ships, the boat/ship operator is responsible for properly displaying all shapes and lights in accordance with applicable regulations. In those situations where the boat operator either displays the warning signals improperly or not at all, NOAA divers shall consider all risks before diving. Report discrepancies to the Vessel Operations Coordinator at your facility.

Cc: SECD, NDCSB  
Attachments: Regulatory Citations



## Warning Signals for NOAA Diving Operations Regulatory Citations:

### NOAA Diving Standards and Safety Manual, 4.2.9 Warning Signals

- A. For all OSHA-exempt dives, when diving in areas capable of supporting marine traffic, a red and white "diver down" sport diving flag, appropriately sized for meeting local legal requirements, shall be displayed at the dive location in a manner which allows all-round visibility, and shall be illuminated during night diving operations.
- B. For all OSHA subject dives conducted from surfaces other than vessels and at the discretion of the DM or LD for all other dives, the international code flag "A" shall be displayed at the dive location in a manner which allows all around visibility, and shall be illuminated during night diving operations.

### USCG 72COLREGS Rule 27 - Vessels Not Under Command or Restricted in Their Ability to Maneuver

(b) A vessel restricted in her ability to maneuver, except a vessel engaged in mine clearance operations, shall exhibit:

- (i) three all-around lights in a vertical line where they can best be seen. The highest and lowest of these lights shall be red and the middle light shall be white;
- (ii) three shapes in a vertical line where they can best be seen. The highest and lowest of these shapes shall be balls and the middle one a diamond.
- (iii) when making way through the water, a masthead light(s), sidelights and a sternlight in addition to the lights prescribed in Rule 27(b)(i);
- (iv) when at anchor, in addition to the lights or shapes prescribed in Rule 27(b)(i) and (ii), the light, lights, or shapes prescribed in Rule 30.

(d) A vessel engaged in dredging or underwater operations, when restricted in her ability to maneuver, shall exhibit the lights and shapes prescribed in Rules 27(b)(i), (ii) and (iii) and shall in addition when an obstruction exists, exhibit:

- (i) two all-round red lights or two balls in a vertical line to indicate the side on which the obstruction exists;
- (ii) two all-round green lights or two diamonds in a vertical line to indicate the side on which another vessel may pass; and
- (iii) when at anchor, the lights or shapes prescribed in this paragraph instead of the lights or shapes prescribed in Rule 30.

(e) Whenever the size of a vessel engaged in diving operations makes it impracticable to exhibit all lights and shapes prescribed in Rule 27(d), the following shall be exhibited:

- (i) Three all-round lights in a vertical line where they can best be seen. The highest and lowest of these lights shall be red and the middle light shall be white;
- (ii) a rigid replica of the International Code flag "A" not less than 1 meter in height. Measures shall be taken to ensure its all-round visibility.

(g) (Inland) Vessels of less than 12 meters in length, except [those] engaged in diving operations, [shall not be] required to exhibit the lights [and] shapes prescribed in this Rule.

(g) (*International*) Vessels of less than 12 meters in length, except [*when*] engaged in diving operations, [*is not*] required to exhibit the lights [*or*] shapes prescribed in this Rule.