



Marine Safety Information Bulletin

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Oily Mixtures (“Oily Bilge Water”) Management for Oceangoing Vessels of less than 400 Gross Tons¹

Compliance Options - Retain onboard or discharge through an oily-water separator (OWS)

Summary

This bulletin summarizes key legal requirements in [33 CFR Part 151, Subpart A](#) and [33 CFR Part 155, Subparts A and B](#) for the proper management and disposal of oily mixtures by oceangoing vessels under 400 gross tons.² An “oceangoing ship [or vessel]” – as defined in [33 CFR 151.05](#) – means any vessel that operates on international voyages, is certified for coastwise service beyond three miles, or operates beyond three nautical miles at any time. Oceangoing vessels falling into this category include – but are not limited to – tugs, ferries, shuttle vessels, commercial fishing vessels, and tour boats.

Oceangoing vessels of less than 400 gross tons must be able to retain all oily mixtures until it can be discharged to a reception facility per [33 CFR 155.350](#). Alternatively, vessels may carry approved oily-water separator (OWS) equipment to separate oil from the water and discharge the water overboard, provided the effluent contains less than 15 parts per million (ppm) oil and meets other criteria provided in [33 CFR 151.10](#). The Coast Guard encourages owners, operators, and crews to take responsible measures to manage oily waste such as reducing the generation of oily mixtures and engaging in voyage planning to account for safe retention and lawful disposal.

Discussion

The regulations discussed in this document have been in effect since 1983. [33 CFR 155.350](#) requires oceangoing vessels of less than 400 gross tons to either 1) have the capacity to retain all oily mixtures onboard and be equipped to discharge said mixtures to a reception facility or 2) have approved OWS equipment for processing oily mixtures from bilges or fuel oil tank ballast and discharges into the sea according to [33 CFR 151.10](#).

[33 CFR 151.10](#) regulates the discharge of oily mixtures by all oceangoing vessels. Discharges of oil or oily mixtures are prohibited *unless* the oil content of the effluent is less than 15 ppm, the vessel has in operation OWS equipment, *and* the vessel meets various other requirements depending on its location. Note that discharges may be permissible in emergencies to secure the safety of a vessel or save life at sea per [33 CFR 151.11](#). Such discharges must be reported to the nearest Captain of the Port or the National Response Center per [33 CFR 151.15](#).

¹ This bulletin provides guidance to the industry, mariners, and the general public. It is not a regulation, is not final agency action, and lacks legally binding effect upon person or entities outside the federal government. This bulletin may be modified or rescinded at the complete discretion of the Coast Guard. It creates no rights or benefits, substantive or procedural, enforceable against the United States, its agencies, or personnel.

² The cited regulations use the term “ship” and “ships” which is synonymous with “vessel” and “vessels.”

Both [33 CFR 155.350](#) and [33 CFR 151.10](#) apply to U.S. vessels (registered under federal law or documented under state law) *wherever located* and to foreign flagged vessels within twelve miles of the U.S. shoreline.³

The terms “oily” and “oily mixtures” have a broad meaning under [33 CFR 151.05](#). The term includes “oily bilge water” which is “water which *may be contaminated* by oil” resulting from leaks or maintenance. Further, “any liquid entering the bilge system” is automatically considered “oily bilge water” per [33 CFR 151.05](#).

Please note the discharge of oily mixtures from oceangoing vessels overboard via “decanting” is prohibited. “Decanting” or “skimming” are common terms related to pumping bilge water from below any perceived oily film or sheen on the bilge water’s surface. This practice is a violation of [33 CFR 151.10](#) and [33 CFR 155.350](#) regardless if the discharge creates a sheen on the outside water. However, if the discharge from *any vessel* creates a sheen or violates applicable state water quality standards, the discharge may separately constitute a violation of the Clean Water Act. 33 U.S.C. §§ [1319\(c\)](#), [1321\(b\)\(6\)](#); [40 CFR 110.3](#).

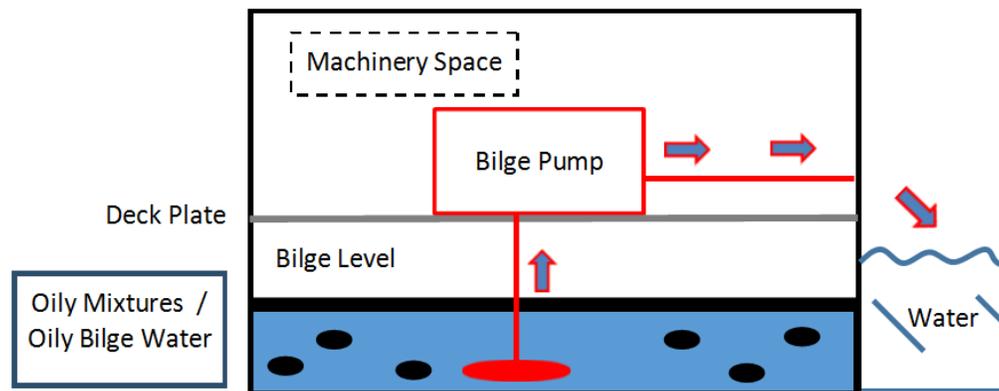


Figure 1 – General depiction of unlawful “decanting” or “skimming” where vessel is not operating oily water separator (OWS) equipment.

Operation of a vessel without pollution prevention equipment required by [33 CFR 155.350](#) or other regulations may result in civil penalties, judicial civil action, and/or Captain of the Port orders directing remedial action. Also, unlawful discharges of oily mixtures may result in the previous listed actions as well as criminal proceedings pursuant to the Act to Prevent Pollution from Ships and the Clean Water Act.

Therefore, the Coast Guard recommends that vessel owners, operators, and crew take reasonable measures to appropriately manage and dispose of all oily mixtures. Examples of such measures may include:

- Identifying and reducing sources of liquid entering machinery space bilges;
- Ensuring material conditions do not result in water entering machinery spaces from non-machinery spaces (e.g., fish holds) resulting from leaks or free communication; and
- Voyage planning for the safe and lawful maintenance and disposal of oily mixtures.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard remains committed to preventing pollution and enforcing our nation’s environmental laws to maintain a level-playing field where violators do not gain an unfair advantage through pollution violations. Readers are encouraged to review the cited regulations and other applicable regulations free of charge via the U.S. Government Publishing Office at www.gpo.gov. Please submit any questions specific to this bulletin to HQS-PF-FLDR-CG-CVC@USCG.MIL.

³ [33 CFR 151.10](#), however, does not apply to U.S. or Canadian vessels operating exclusively on the Great Lakes, their connected tributary waters, or the internal waters of the United States. See [33 CFR 151.09\(b\)](#).