



UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

MARINE SAFETY ALERT

Inspections and Compliance Directorate

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Safety Alert 09-23

BY LAND AND SEA – FIREFIGHTING PREPARATION IS KEY!

The purpose of this Marine Safety Alert is to raise awareness within the Marine Transportation System to the unique dangers of shipboard fires, particularly onboard multi-level freight vessels like vehicle carrying Roll-on, Roll-off or “Ro-Ros”.

In July 2023, a foreign flagged Ro-Ro experienced a fire on one of its vehicle decks while cargo was being loaded dockside. With over 1,200 vehicles on board, the fire quickly spread out of control to the point where most firefighting efforts became ineffective.



Tragically, during the response, two land-based firefighters lost their lives, and several others were injured. Preliminary findings of the ongoing investigation, led by the Coast Guard working with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, indicated that the local fire department responding to the incident had little to no maritime firefighting training, experience, or familiarization with cargo ships of any type. Unfortunately, this is only one of several vessel fires occurring within the last five years where the lack of familiarity with commercial vessels and inexperience with shipboard firefighting techniques unduly endangered the safety of responding personnel.

Vessel fires require more firefighting resources and different technical skills than many land-based firefighting agencies traditionally possess. While shipboard fires may occur less frequently than other types, when they do, they can present significant risk to untrained first responders. Additionally, large foreign flagged vessels are typically operated by international crewmembers, for many of whom English is not their first language. While English is often the ship’s working language, the stress of an emergency and unexpectedly engaging with U.S. authorities can break down the ability for effective communication. It is critical that fire departments with commercial ports in their area of responsibility ensure their personnel understand the common vessel types and the unique hazards posed by each.

The Coast Guard **strongly recommends** that local fire departments, and port stakeholders:

- Engage with each other and their local Captain of the Port, as part of their Area Contingency Plan, to establish regular shipboard firefighting education and training in conjunction with the drills and exercises required for certain vessels under Title 33, Code of Federal Regulations, Section 155.4052.

- That fire departments develop training, qualification, and response doctrine utilizing guidance from the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) standards *1005: Standards for Professional Qualifications for Marine Fire Fighting for Land-Based Fire Fighters*, and *1405: Guide for Land-Based Fire Departments that Respond to Marine Vessel Fires*. This should include addressing topics such as unified command, shore to ship equipment interoperability, suppression systems, air management, and communications.

Effectively implemented, this two-prong approach will ensure the readiness of land-based firefighters to respond to maritime fires.

The Coast Guard **strongly recommends** that Coast Guard Captains of the Port, emergency response services, and port stakeholders:

- Incorporate into their planning process immediate access to translation capabilities, which could include translation apps or professional in person translator services, to assist first responders to decrease language barriers and increase effectiveness.

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