

Prevention of Collision at Sea

Rounding Out the COLREG Series

by Vincent Pica, District Captain, Sector Long Island Sound/South, D1SR, United States Coast Guard Auxiliary

Over the past 12 months we have published columns focusing in some detail on two or three COLREGs at a time. It is hard to find topics more important than the COLREGs, so we wanted to be sure to provide detailed focus where detail was indicated. This technique, though, has left a handful of regulations that require little more than a statement of fact and wouldn't, by themselves or in groups of two or three, provide sufficient *gravitas* to warrant a separate column. Here they are.

Rule 10 – Traffic Separation Schemes

In highly trafficked waters, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) adopts traffic separation schemes (TSS) which are “lanes” for in-bound and out-bound commercial vessels to use. Like our asphalt roads, these roads also have a “median divider” to separate the in-bound from the out-bound lanes. You can find them in magenta on your charts. Take a look at the Ambrose Channel coming out of New York/Newark harbors on your charts

All vessels in-bound or out-bound to the designated harbors “shall” (means: must) use them. They are directed to enter and exit them at the two terminuses or, if not practical, to enter or leave them at as small an angle as practicable. If such vessels need to cross the TSS, they shall do so at as close to a right angle as is practical, i.e., get across as quickly as possible, subject to the COLREGs – Rule 15. All COLREGs apply within the TSS. Guess what else? You are most likely exempt as sailboats, motored vessels less than 20 meters (~60 feet) and boats engaged in fishing with nets or lines. So, why bother?

If fishing (and they mean commercial fishing boats, not guys with Penn reels and a Grady White), the vessel must move in the general direction of traffic AND not impede the passage of any other boat using the lane. This has implications for Rule 18 and the priority of vessels in various rungs of the “pecking order.”

If fishing with nets near a TSS (or in a TSS for that matter), the vessel's nets cannot extend into the TSS and impede the traffic of any other boat using the lane.

Rule 12 – Sailing Vessels

Since sailboats can't sail into the wind, there are special rules which guide us and them as to priorities and protocols (see Rule 18). But what about sailboat vs. sailboat? Rule 12 rules as follows. First, the vessel with the wind on her port side shall keep out of the way of the other. Second, if both sailboats have their mainsail trimmed to the starboard side (opposite the wind and thus both boats have the wind on their port side), the boat farthest upwind is the give-way vessel. In fact, in all conditions, if both sail boats have the wind on the same side, the boat farthest upwind is the give-way vessel (see Rule 17).

What about conflicting or overriding rules? There is only one – Rule 13. Overtaking overrules Rule 12 when one sailboat is overtaking the other, i.e., from more than 22.5° abaft (behind) the beam. Then, the overtaking sailboat, regardless of where the wind is from, is the give-way vessel.

What Does Rule 28 Say?

Rule 28 is about the Shapes and Lights that a vessel “constrained by her draft” uses to proclaim that she is drawing pretty much all the water there is – so don't even think about her moving out of the channel for you. The Shape is a cylinder (think “beer can”) and her Light, in addition to running lights consistent with her length, is 3 all-around red lights in a vertical row. And guess where there are no rights to proclaim you are “constrained by draft?” In the inland waters.

What Does Rule 29 Say?

Rule 29 is about the Shapes and Lights that a vessel carrying a “pilot” uses to proclaim that she is involved in “pilotage.” First, there is no Shape. Her Light, in addition to running lights consistent with her length, is two lights in a vertical line near or at the masthead – white over red (the opposite of the Fishing Light “red over white, we be fishing tonight”). Her Sound, by the way, is 4 short blasts on the whistle – “Pilot aboard. Stand well clear.”

What Does Rule 30 Say?

Rule 30 is about the Shapes and Lights that a vessel “at anchor” or “hard aground” uses to say “I'm staying right here.” With respect to a vessel hard aground, she really is “staying right here” because, unlike a vessel at anchor, she will not swing down wind when the wind shifts.

A vessel of 50 meters or greater and at anchor must display two white all-around lights – one in the forepart of the vessel and high enough so that is well above the second all-around white light at the stern. In lieu of the forelight, she may display one “ball” as her Shape. If she is 100 meters or greater, she must also use her working lights to illuminate her decks between the anchor lights or shape and anchor light. Vessels less than 50 meters (that would be us) need only use the one all-around light at the stern, hence, our stern poles with the white all-around light.

If she is hard aground, in addition to the anchor lights prescribed above, she must display two red lights in a vertical line (see Rule 27) or three balls in a line (“Balls! Balls! Balls! I'm stuck!”). The vessel less than 12 meters is not required to display her ignominy.

When is a vessel at anchor NOT required to display a Shape or Light in that regard? When she is in a special anchorage “designated by the Secretary.” Why? Everybody is at anchor.

What Does Rule 31 Say?

Rule 31 is about the Shapes and Lights for a vessel that is in reality a seaplane (but afloat). These “vessels” get a “pass” to a certain extent because they also have light requirements associated with their primary purpose – an aeronautical craft. So, she “shall exhibit Lights and Shapes as closely similar in characteristics and position as is possible.” “WIGs,” or hydrofoils, are also subject to Rule 31.

Rule 38 - Exemptions

If there are rules, there are exemptions. You've seen that already in a number of the

columns, including this one (re; Rule 10 above). Rule 38 basically says that any boat whose keel was laid before a particular version of the Rules went into force is exempt with respect to Rule 22 for a specified number of years before they must retrofit to the Rules. The exemptions run from 4 to 9 years – except (an exemption to the exemption!) vessels of less than 20 meters (~60 feet) are permanently exempt! In short, our boats can keep whatever USCG standards there were at the time her keel was laid.

Annex I

When is an exemption not an exemption? When it is an annex. Annex I is about the proper positioning of lights. Again, it only applies to vessels in excess of 20 meters (~66 feet), but what is important to know is that things like the vertical spacing in the positioning of lights are set specifically so you don't get too confused by the bane of all skippers at night – shore lights.

Annex II

While there are 14 separate sections to Annex I, Annex II reserves itself for additional signals for fishing vessels fishing in close proximity – a familiar issue even if we aren't all commercial fishermen. In keeping with Annex I, it specifies what lights to use when shooting nets, hauling nets or trying to unfoul them from the bottom!

Annex III

Once you've set the technical specs for lights and shapes, there aren't many things left. One thing for sure is Sound Signal “Appliances”, i.e., your whistle, horn, bell or gong. And, here, the exemption size isn't 20 meters (~66 feet); it is 12 meters (~39 feet.) That starts to get into “bay-sized” boats. The Annex specifies frequency, intensity and range that it is hearable.

Annex IV

Another technical specification is distress signals. **Rule 36 and Rule 37** tie directly into this Annex.

Annex V

Here is one where there is very little chance anybody reading this will care about... It is for Pilots – not the kind that fly planes but the kind that guide/assist large vessels into harbors.

So, there you have it! All the columns on the COLREGs can be had by emailing me below or going to <http://www.atlanticmaritimeacademy.com/seamanship.html#colregs>

This concludes the series of USCG COLREGs. I want to thank, on behalf of USCG Forces, the people at Long Island Boating World for giving us this venue to get this critical information into the hands of their readers

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux2010@aol.com or go direct to John Blevins, who is in charge of new members matters, at FSO-PS@emcg.us and we will help you “get in this thing...”