



by Vincent Pica

### [How to handle that dreaded weather condition – fog](#)

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Even though the month nicknamed “Fogust” is over, Northwest boaters still need to be aware of a weather condition that strikes fear in the heart of many mariners.

There are three different types of fog. There’s fog that forms when water is warmer than the air, called “steam” fog (think of a boiling pot of spaghetti). Fog that forms when the water is colder than the air is called “advection” fog. The third type, called “radiation” fog, is formed by cooling of the land after sunset by thermal radiation.

But fog is fog. You can’t see land or buoys or, worse, your bow! What to do?

Well, with the dropping price of radar, boats in the mid-20-foot range can now be found with radar aboard. If you do have radar, read the manual and get familiar with gain controls. Not surprisingly, the advice below holds for the 65-footer with radar and chart overlay capabilities as well as the skipper in the 17-foot open boat with a 90-horsepower Merc on the stern.

When the fog rolls in:

1. Slow down to a “slow bell” — that is, with forward propulsion necessary to maintain steering but no more than that. If you haven’t done so already, ensure everyone onboard is wearing life jackets.
2. While underway and making way with your engine in gear, give one prolonged blast on your whistle (four to six seconds). This is specified in the Navigation Rules, Rule 35(a), which say those blasts should be not more than two minutes apart — in other words, no LESS than every two minutes.
3. While underway but **not** making way — that is, a dead stop on the engine but not at anchor — give two prolonged blasts a couple of seconds apart, no less than every two minutes. This is Rule 35(b).
4. If you need to anchor due to visibility (i.e. there is none), the rules say that “boats less than 39 feet 4 inches (12 meters) in length may make an efficient sound signal at intervals of not more than two minutes.” In short, the rules don’t specify what the proper protocol is for boats under 12 meters, so use your best judgment and err on the side of caution. Boats larger than 12 meters at anchor must clang their bell five times quickly, followed by one prolonged and one short (less than one second) blast with the whistle.
5. Listen. Sound travels more efficiently through fog than clear air. Bring your engine to a dead stop from time to time and listen. Listen for the sound of surf (move away from that!), buoy whistles or horns or bells (move towards that, carefully), or other engines (sound your danger whistle right away and throttle all the way down — but don’t turn off the engine!)

So, now you are properly communicating with other boats but want to get in out of the fog if you can. How? Don’t, as some old chestnuts might advise, hug the shore. As the fog intensifies and you draw closer and closer to shore, a grounding is likely. Of far more danger, don’t hug the shore when you are on the ocean side. If you get caught in the surf line, you could be capsized and face an imminent threat to life.

If you can’t see, you must stop, drop the hook, sound your warning horn as specified and wait out the fog. If your GPS indicates that you are in a heavy traffic lane, get out — at a slow speed and just far enough to be out of the traffic. But if you can’t see past the bow and you are underway and making way, you are in extreme danger of having a collision at sea.

If you have some visibility, see rules 1 and 2 above. The slower speed will help in another way as well – you can hear more clearly. Lastly, if you have those canisters of compressed gas as your boat’s horn/whistle, you will likely run out of compressed air before you run out of fog. Think about getting a simple whistle. Get the “pealess” kind, which creates sound by using air pressure only.

*This post is courtesy of [Capt. Vincent Pica](#), chief of staff for the First District, Southern Region, United States Coast Guard Auxiliary.*

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