

Preventing Collisions At Sea

August 7, 2008



There are only three conditions of vessels meeting on the waters-head-on, crossing or overtaking situations. This covers two power-driven vessels about to cross each other's paths-a possible collision course.

When two vessels appear to be heading across each other's paths, this is by definition a crossing situation. But how can you tell if you are actually on a collision course?

At night, if you see a red light and a white light above it and trailing behind, you are crossing each other's path and she is the stand-on vessel. You are the give-way. If you see a green and a white light above it and trailing behind, you have a crossing situation where you are the stand-on vessel-but always keep an eye the other craft! During the day, you can obviously see if the vessel is crossing your path on your starboard side (you are give-way) or on your port side (you are stand-on).

Mark the other boat against something fixed on your boat-a cleat, the anchor-that is traveling with you. If the opposing boat continues on or around that fixed mark as you both continue your course and speed, a collision is about to happen!

When in doubt, assume you are on a collision course and act accordingly. In this situation, the give-way vessel is, by preference, to turn to starboard and go behind her. Take “early and substantial” action so that your maneuver is “telegraphed” to the other skipper.

But what if you see that you cannot turn to starboard because of traffic conditions like rocks, and shallows? Rule 15 says that the give-way vessel “shall avoid crossing ahead of the other vessel,” so do not speed up and try to cross ahead. The stand-on skipper may be doing the same thing because he hasn’t noticed your early and evasive action. If you don’t have substantial time and distance to telegraph such a maneuver, slow down or even stop. Let the approaching vessel pass ahead of you, just as you would allow a sail boat.

What if a vessel constrained by the nature of its work-say a dredger-is on your port side? Any power-driven vessel approached on its port side by a hampered vessel must keep clear. You can increase speed to pass ahead though, if conditions clearly permit.

If you are crossing a narrow channel, Rule 9(d) governs. “A vessel shall not cross a narrow channel or fairway if such crossing impedes the passage of a vessel which can safely navigate only within such a channel or fairway.” How can you tell the other boat can’t navigate outside the channel? Assume the worst.

Lastly, if you are in a “traffic separation scheme,” and if you fish the Canyons you may be, Rule 10(j) prohibits a boat of less than 20 meters (roughly 65 feet) from impeding the safe passage of a power-driven vessel following the traffic lane.