



Date: April 23, 2008

Coast Guard issues cold-water safety advisory

BOSTON - The Coast Guard is issuing a cold water safety advisory for all early season boaters, paddlers, sailors and fishers on the inland and coastal waters of the Northeast's First Coast Guard District. The milder temperatures and absence of ice on most inland lakes and ponds is deceptive and danger still exists.

The spring melt of this winter's heavy snow pack is flooding rivers and streams creating hazardous conditions that can be unforgiving to the inexperienced or ill-prepared boater or paddler.

"The water temperatures in the Northeast are closer to the freezing point than they are to being even remotely tolerable, no matter how comfortable the air temperature may be," said Al Johnson, recreational boating specialist for the First Coast Guard District. "If you capsize or fall overboard your chance of survival is extremely poor unless you are properly attired, equipped and mentally prepared for sudden cold water immersion. I wish I could say it in gentler terms but, plain and simple, cold water shocks, incapacitates and kills."

By this time last year, there were a total of nine recreational boating and paddling fatalities in the Northeast, Johnson said. Of these, six occurred in non-motorized vessels, and all nine were the result of capsizing or falling overboard. Of the nine incidents, only one person wore a life jacket and, while he was in a group of properly equipped and experienced white-water kayakers, tragically he capsized in rapids and was unable to recover.

"This year we've lost a canoeist and a kayaker, and the waters are waiting and may exact their toll on the uninformed and those who put safety secondary," Johnson said.

Johnson strongly recommends that anyone venturing out on the water at any time of the year do a thorough risk assessment, and be prepared for the worst case scenario and develop a mindset and course of action to survive. He also stresses to boaters and paddlers the importance of wearing a life jacket rather than just having one available, and insisting that passengers or paddling partners wear them as well.

"More than 80 percent of Northeast boating and paddling fatalities are the result of capsizing or falling overboard," said Johnson. "Wearing a life jacket is the first step in surviving sudden cold water immersion. Researching and understanding the latest

concepts in cold water and hypothermia awareness and protection is the second. Remember, when you're on the water, you're in command and your personal safety and that of your passengers is paramount and is your responsibility."

Additionally, paddlers on the waters of Massachusetts are required to wear a life jacket while underway through May 15, 2008, in Connecticut through May 30, and in Maine on the Saco River below the Hiram Dam through June 1.

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