



Date: May 1, 2008

Coast Guard launches Operation Paddle Smart

Boston - The First Coast Guard District is launching Operation Paddle Smart today to bring greater awareness to paddlesport safety in the Northeast.

The district suffered the loss of 58 recreational boaters and paddlers in 2007; 15 canoe and eight kayak fatalities accounted for 40 percent of the total. Since 1998 when the First Coast Guard District began tracking area-specific recreational fatalities, canoe and kayak fatalities have averaged 30 percent of yearly totals - more than double the national average.

Operation Paddle Smart, though it is an ongoing program, officially runs from May 1 to June 30. The operation is a multi-partnered endeavor developed by the First Coast Guard District, Coast Guard Auxiliary and U.S. Power Squadrons to generate greater safety awareness among paddlers and small boat operators. The primary goals are to promote the life-saving benefit of wearing a life jacket, to highlight the immediate danger of sudden cold water immersion, to encourage boater and paddler education, and to stress the importance of being a responsible and prudent mariner.

"We've designed Operation Paddle Smart to be a focal point for organizations and retailers to work together to promote paddlesport safety, and as an information source for all paddlers and small boaters," said Cdr. Tom Miller, Deputy Chief of the First Coast Guard District Prevention Division.

Operation Paddle Smart members, over the next two months, will be distributing paddlesport safety packets throughout the Northeast. Data will also be collected to determine what efforts worked best and to solicit feedback from paddlers on how the operation can be improved or how it has benefited them.

"The waters of the Northeast are extremely inviting but they temperamental and can be mercilessly unforgiving to unsuspecting and ill-prepared boaters and paddlers," said Al Johnson, First Coast Guard District recreational boating specialist. "Operation Paddle Smart is a multi-partnered effort to educate and remind new, casual, and experienced paddlers to assess the risks, envision the consequences, and use our waters safely and be properly prepared for what can go wrong. Remember, when you're on the water, you're in command, and your personal safety and that of your passengers or paddling partners is paramount and your responsibility."

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.

Organizations, retailers and others interested in joining the Operation Paddle Smart partnership or paddlers seeking additional information may contact the Operation Paddle Smart hotline at 617-223-8619.

