



Smoke Detectors On Boats — What You Need To Know

Do you have a smoke detector installed on your boat? Should you? Must you?

To help answer the last question, we first examine the standards set forth by The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). The NFPA develops codes, standards, recommended practices and guidelines for the prevention of fire, explosions and for life safety in the event of a fire. While the NFPA has no power to police or enforce compliance with its recommended standards, any jurisdiction or entity that adopts or incorporates NFPA standards may enforce them as they see fit.

NFPA 302, Fire Protection Standard for Pleasure and Commercial Motor Craft, as updated in 2004, contains for the first time, a recommended requirement that smoke detectors be installed aboard pleasure boats. Specifically, Chapter 12, Section 12.3 entitled Smoke Detection, states: "All vessels 26 ft. or more in length with accommodation spaces intended for sleeping shall be equipped with a single station smoke alarm that is listed to UL 217, Standard for Single and Multiple Station Smoke Alarms, for recreational vehicles and is installed and maintained according to the device manufacturer's instructions." This article will treat the terms "smoke detector" and "smoke alarm" as one and the same.

Since there are currently no smoke detectors that are UL (Underwriters Laboratories) listed for marine applications, the UL 217 listing (as recommended by NFPA) refers to those types of smoke detectors acceptable for use in a recreational vehicle. Unfortunately, when purchasing a smoke detector, whether for your home, recreational vehicle or boat, you may find it as "UL listed" but without a specific UL standard number or application noted on the device or its packaging. This may make it difficult to find an appropriate smoke detector unless you are buying from a specialty store dealing with recreational vehicle or marine accessories and supplies. Smoke detectors designed for home use are not recommended for use on a boat as they will likely not withstand the harsh marine environment.

So, should you have a smoke detector on your boat? The answer is yes. Must you? At this time only if the standards as recommended and set forth in NFPA 302 have been adopted or incorporated by an applicable jurisdiction or entity. Is anyone going to enforce the NFPA recommended standards at this time? Probably only marine surveyors and the insurance companies they work for, as not having a proper onboard smoke detector is definitely an exposure that should be addressed for life safety purposes, and is one that can easily be remedied by the boat owner installing an appropriate smoke detector.

While, to date, no other regulatory or standards-issuing entity has promulgated a requirement or recommendation to install a smoke detector aboard a pleasure vessel, it may only be a matter of time before this newest NFPA recommended standard for boats is adopted by the American Boat & Yacht Council (ABYC) or in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) issued by the Federal Government and enforced by the U.S. Coast Guard.

So, go ahead and beat everyone to the punch and be one of the first in your marina to install the appropriate smoke detector on your boat. Isn't your life and that of your family and guests worth the minimal investment of installing one? Also, installing one now allows you to be compliant ahead of time should the NFPA recommended standards become enforceable in your area.

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