

## ***US Coast Guard and VTS guidelines - A brief introduction,***

The Vessel Traffic Service Puget Sound (VTS) is a marine traffic service operated by the United States Coast Guard in Seattle. Also known as "**Seattle Traffic**," we provide navigational assistance to the maritime community of Puget Sound similar to the methods used by the FAA in providing air traffic control to aviators.

We provide *our* service by use of the following methods:

- 1. Radar surveillance** -12 strategically located radar stations from Cape Flattery, through Rosario Strait in the San Juan Islands, to Tacoma.
- 2. Vessel movement reporting** -VHF-FM radio channels 5A, and 14.
- 3. Traffic separation scheme (TSS)** -buoys, and charted traffic lanes that direct the flow of traffic.

The VTS monitors 230,000 vessel movements a year in the 3,500 sq. mi. Puget Sound area. These vessel transits are comprised of mainly large commercial and government craft such as freighters, container ships, tankers, coastal freighters, tugs, fishing vessels, tour boats, Navy ships, and ferries. All of these vessels are required to participate in whole, or in part with the VTS under 33 Code of Federal Regulations Part 161.

## ***Your responsibilities***

**Unless specifically directed by the VTS, the recreational boater is exempt from participation with the VTS in all but the required conduct that governs ALL vessels in, or near a TSS** - reference Rule 10 for International Waters as established by the International Maritime Organization, and published in the Navigation Rules by the USCG. This is also found in our own publication, the VTS User's Manual.

**Passive listening of the appropriate VTS frequency for your area is highly encouraged!** Being tuned in to VTS is free, and a great source of timely traffic information that could save your life, loved ones, and property. *See inside back cover for additional guidance in operator responsibility.*

## ***Rule 10 and the TSS...***

International "Rules of the Road" apply everywhere in the Puget Sound, including Lake Washington. These rules not only dictate vessel conduct when meeting, overtaking, or crossing another vessel, but also specify vessel conduct near a traffic separation scheme -where one exists. Chances are you are familiar with the charted traffic lanes in the Puget Sound. If you are not, obtain a nautical chart of the area (s) you enjoy and familiarize yourself with them. *See opposite page for an example.* The traffic lane network in the Puget Sound begins at buoy J -"*Juliet*" north

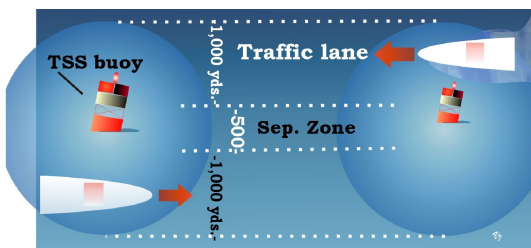
of Cape Flattery and continues all the way to Tacoma's buoy TC - "*Tango Charlie*" with Rosario Strait, and Haro Strait bound branches stemming from buoy SA - "*Sierra Alpha*."

Our TSS has two traffic lanes with a separation zone between them to divide east bounders from west bounders, and north from south. TSS buoys are placed at the termination/turning areas of the lanes and serve to mark the center of the separation zone. Strictly speaking, if you wish to avoid oncoming traffic, you always keep the separation zone, and buoys, on your port side. Under this arrangement you will meet all oncoming traffic "port to port" with room to spare.

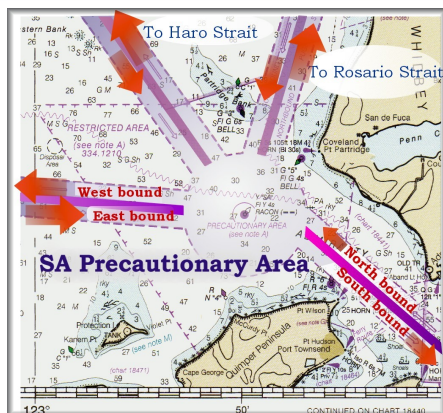
The whole idea here is vessel predictability and safety.

You do not need our permission to use these charted lanes! Simply abide by the TSS rules: Proceed in the direction of traffic. If joining or leaving, do so at a TSS buoy by passing the buoy on your port side. When not near a buoy, join or leave a lane *with* the direction of traffic. Avoid the separation zone as much as possible. If it is necessary to cross the lanes (and separation zone) then do so at right angles to minimize the time crossing. When not using the lanes, you are responsible for knowing the location of the TSS, and avoiding others using it. Above all, do not impede traffic. Each year, numerous incidents involve boaters being in the way, or, proceeding the *wrong* way in a traffic lane. Often, the vessels they obstruct are large container ships or tankers that cannot maneuver sharply to avoid them.

1Much of the VTS area is without traffic lanes or radar coverage. The area east of Whidbey Island, the interior of the San Juan Archipelago, Hood Canal, all waters south of Pt. Defiance, and most of Colvos Passage are without a TSS or radar. Vessels that are *required* to participate make position reports via VHF-FM on the appropriate VTS frequency.



The traffic separation scheme consists of TSS buoys, and a 500 yard separation zone between two 1,000 yard traffic lanes.



*Inset from NOAA chart 18400.*

The "Sierra Alpha" buoy near Port Townsend is a major convergence area for vessel traffic. Combined with strong currents and pervasive fog, the SA precautionary area can be challenging to navigate.

## ***Radio communications,***

Your participation as a recreational boater, if mindful of the TSS, satisfies your requirement with "Seattle Traffic." Any further participation is strictly voluntary, unless directed by the VTS. If you use a VHF-FM radio please follow these guidelines:

You are encouraged to monitor Seattle Traffic, but we ask that you limit your communications to essential navigational safety information, and emergencies.

Know the proper VTS (Seattle Traffic) frequency for the area you are navigating. [\*See following page.\*](#)

Listen before keying, do not "walk on" other comms. Always use low power to reduce interference.

Monitor designated frequencies 13 and 16. Channel 13 is designated for bridge to bridge communications and is a requirement for vessels 20 meters and larger. It is also used by Seattle Traffic as a secondary frequency. Bridges, and Ballard Locks use channel 13 for emergencies and communications at night. Channel 16 is the designated international distress and calling frequency. You are encouraged to use channel 16, ***in an emergency***, to contact Coast Guard search and rescue units.

Cellular phones cannot replace the VHF-FM marine radio's ability to communicate marine safety information with multiple marine users at one time. If you have only a cellular phone, and need emergency assistance, call \*CG, or #CG. Seattle Traffic is (206) 217 6151, 6050.

Typical calling locations for **channel 14**: Hood Canal, Shilshole/Seattle, Bremerton, Bainbridge, Tacoma, Olympia -everywhere south of Nodule and Possession west of Whidbey Is. **Channel 5A**: Everett, Port Townsend, LaConner, Anacortes, Bellingham, San Juan Archipelago, Port Angeles, Neah Bay, *Port San Juan, B.C.* -Seattle Traffic monitors vessel traffic in Canadian waters in the Strait of Juan de Fuca! *Victoria/Vancouver Traffic monitors all traffic in Haro Strait and the Victoria area, and waters north of Patos Island on channel 11.*

## *Special areas*

Leaving SA to starboard: SA is located north of Port Townsend. These buoys mark challenging areas in the Puget Sound and it is not uncommon to encounter tugs with tows, and large vessels such as tankers that, due to the special constraints of their tow, or inability to turn sharply, "cut," or leave the buoy to starboard. This maneuver, for these specific buoys, is deemed a lesser navigation risk than properly leaving the buoy on their port side. The Master, Mate, or Pilot radio their intent to deviate from the rules to Seattle Traffic prior to the act. Almost without exception, a south bound tug and tow will pass east of SA directly from Partridge Bank to Pt. Wilson, or be asked to stay east of the lanes until traffic has cleared. On the other hand, some vessels stay close to Pt. Wilson west bound to avoid the weather and currents.. **Also, in an emergency, deep drafts and tugs may find it necessary to enter the separation zone anywhere in the TSS to avoid hazards such as nets, or small boats.**

## *Recent issues in safety*

**"I have a sailboat, and have the right of way." -Not always!** If your sailboat is 20 meters or greater, and your motor is running, then you are considered a power-driven vessel underway, and the vessel to starboard has the right of way -as stated in Rule 15 of the Navigation Rules. If you are under sail only, you shall not impede *any* power-driven vessel using the TSS. Additionally, if your sailboat is less than 20 meters, powered or not, you shall not impede any power-driven vessel using the TSS.

## *Advice from the Captains*

Know and follow the "Rules of the Road." Be aware that specific rules apply in the vicinity of large ships when operating in narrow channels (Rule 9) and traffic separation schemes (Rule 10).

Stay clear of tankers and freighters. They have limited ability to maneuver and risk grounding or colliding with other boats if forced to take evasive action.

Take early positive action to avoid close quarters situations. Avoid crossing ahead of, or operating close to a deep draft ship. Never cross between a tug and their tow, be wary of submerged apparatus trailing barges.

Develop a situational awareness of all the vessels in your vicinity. Be aware that strict adherence to the Rules of the Road may not be practical in crowded situations (Rule 2).

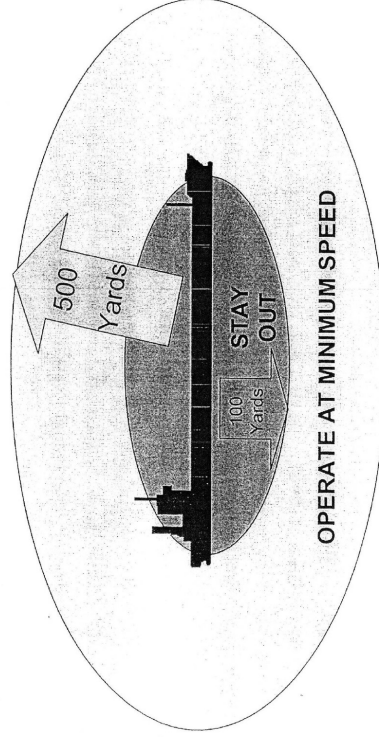
Maintain a proper lookout. Autopilot does not relieve you of the responsibility of keeping a good lookout.

Take early and substantial action to indicate your intention to change course and speed. *Show a side.*

Use your navigation lights between sunset and sunrise, and in restricted visibility.

# WARNING!

**Do not approach within 100 yards of any tank ship.** If you need to pass within 100 yards of a tank ship in order to ensure a safe passage in accordance with the Navigation Rules, you must contact the tank ship on VHF-FM channel 16 or 13.



**You must operate at minimum speed within 500 yards of any tank ship.**

**Violations of the Tank Ship Security Zone are a felony offense, punishable by up to 6 years in prison and/or up to \$250,000 in fines**