

Fire Extinguishers at Sea: Have Plenty, Store Properly

Be prepared to respond to fire aboard boats.

By Bob Cusack, USCG Auxiliary May 8, 2011

A couple of weeks ago Terry Date of the Swampscott Patch interviewed me about boating safety. One of the things I mentioned was how to store fire extinguishers on a boat. Here are some additional thoughts on the subject.

The only place I can think where a fire is more dangerous is on an airplane while in flight. (I have added on a submarine but few of us will ever be underway on one) In my opinion, having that fire on a boat while at sea is next. Help or rescue may be an hour or more away, so I think the more fire extinguishers aboard the better.

The US Coast Guard publishes safety equipment lists, which lists what's required depending on your boat size; consider that list the minimum. Have at least one extinguisher per section of the boat, one in the cockpit, one near the engine, one in the galley and one in each sleeping area. My boat, a 30-foot sailboat, has at least five. An all-purpose extinguisher, classed ABC, is best: A for wood fires, B liquid, and C electrical.

In the interview, I mentioned storing them in a horizontal position, a relatively new idea. In the traditional vertical position, the motion of the boat tends to compact the chemical powder into a solid block, and, though the extinguisher will discharge, that discharge may only be propellant, not extinguishing agent. By storing in a horizontal position, the motion of the boat will shake the chemical powder back and forth and retard compaction.

To check if your extinguisher is in working order, make sure the pressure gauge needle is in the green, and then shake the extinguisher and listen for the sound of the contents moving back and forth. If you do not hear any movement, invert the extinguisher and hit it on the bottom with a rubber mallet.

In some cases, that action will loosen the contents. Again, shake the extinguisher and listen for movement. If you have any doubts, dispose of the extinguisher in a proper manner and replace it with a new one(s). To be on the safe side, consider replacing your fire extinguishers every seven (7) years if they cannot be refilled.

And when you buy your replacements, make sure the top nozzle fitting is all metallic; those with black plastic fittings cannot be refilled!