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Take care with portable petrol engines says BSS

Boaters who use petrol generators and other petrol-engined power tools may need to raise their game to avoid the dangers of petrol vapour and exhaust fumes says the Boat Safety Scheme, as the numbers of incidents on inland waters linked to petrol and petrol engines rose for the second year running from one in 2007 to nine in 2009.

'We implore boaters to be extremely careful with any petrol powered equipment.' said Graham Watts, the Boat Safety Scheme Manager.

He added: 'Petrol safety has to be considered at every stage from maintenance, refuelling, stowage and when in use - especially with the added danger of the poisonous exhaust gases. Boaters cannot afford to drop their guard when dealing with highly flammable fuels and toxic fumes.'

The Scheme is worried that some boaters, and especially new entrants, may not appreciate the nature of petrol vapour and the bucket-like quality of a boat hull. It is keen for boaters to understand that if petrol spills, drips or leaks, it will vaporise and, like liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), the vapour will sink in still air and gather in the lower parts of the boat.

If petrol leaks and the resulting vapour and air mix comes into contact with a naked flame or a spark, a rapid and powerful ignition can take place that will likely endanger the person handling the equipment or anyone nearby. More people are injured in petrol vapour ignitions than any other cause of fire on boats.

- Stow any item containing petrol on open decks or in fire-resistant lockers with freely draining outlets at the bottom where any escaped vapour of petrol will drain to outside the boat. This includes equipment with integral fuel tanks or spare fuel containers.
- If you really need to carry spare petrol, only store it in containers specifically designed by the manufacturer for use with petrol.
- Don't use any bowl, bucket or other open container to carry or transfer petrol or mix in 2-stroke oil.
- Invest in anti-spill containers or spouts to allow, clean and easy, no-spill refuelling – and don't forget to use them.
- Before fuelling up, and before use, check the equipment for signs of any damage or problems that could lead to petrol leaks and when fuelled, continue to check for leaks.

- Avoid refuelling any item aboard the boat; take it to the bank and safe distance from any boats or other sources of ignition.
- If there is any chance that petrol vapour may be blown back into the boat, close all windows, hatches and doors before removing any tank or container caps. Also turn off all cooking and heating appliances. Avoiding sparks and do not switch on any electrical items or circuits.
- Do not refuel while the engine and exhaust is still hot, let it cool awhile.
- Before starting the boats engine, turning any switch or lighting any flame, check that no petrol vapours have entered the boat. If there's a strong smell of petrol do not assume it is OK to carry on. Open all windows, hatches, doors and covers to ventilate the boat until the smell has gone.
- Don't use petrol-powered equipment within the boat, most equipment engines produce high volumes of carbon monoxide in the exhaust.
- For the same reasons, avoid running petrol powered tools for long periods near doors, vents, windows and hatches. Never run generators close to such openings.
- After use, let the equipment cool and then check for any new signs of damage or newly developed leaks. Stow in the locker or on open deck.

The BSS has petrol safety information at

www.boatsafetyscheme.com/downloads/avoidingPETROL.pdf

- ENDS -

Notes for editors

In the past six years the BSS has recorded 34 incidents of fire or explosion linked to petrol engines on inland waterways and coastal boats. 31 people needed hospital treatment, including some in intensive care. In the same period, seven incidents of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning have been linked to generators and outboard motor exhaust fumes.

The BSS is a public safety project owned jointly by British Waterways and the Environment Agency. At least 12 other navigation and harbour authorities have also adopted it. The navigation authorities' purposes for the Scheme are to help reduce the risks of fire, explosion and pollution on small craft. This is done by promoting fire safety and pollution avoidance advice to help boat owners keep themselves and their crews' safe as well as regular examination of fuel systems, gas systems, electrical systems and appliances.

Reporter's contacts

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