

# Boating Tips



BY KEVIN O'LEARY

## Interpreting Weather Forecasts

**D**uring the off-season, my business focuses more on delivering vessels to and from the Bay and Delta and conducting sea trials than instruction. I limit my area of operation to as far as I can go in one day. This is serious business. I'm getting on a vessel I don't know the history of and traveling by myself on what usually is a desolate (and sometimes very cold and wet) voyage. I've probably made the trip from the Bay to the Delta about 100 times. Let me tell you, there are many opportunities to run aground and many other hazards to deal with.

Because I know the route so well, running aground is not my biggest concern. It's the weather that I pay close attention to. I and I alone make the ultimate decision to depart or abort regardless of the financial or time ramifications. In order to make this decision, I factor in the weather and the vessel's integrity, design, size and mechanical condition.

Over the years I've had clients shake their heads and say: "Are you sure you want to deliver this boat today with this weather?" Others have said: "Why don't you go? The weather looks fine to me."

In the final analysis, it is up to me to make a professional decision as to whether the conditions are right and the vessel is worthy of taking on what might be encountered. This is where weather comes in. In my opinion it is incumbent upon every recreational mariner to understand and interpret weather forecasts in order to be safe on the water. Remember, conditions can change at any time. You may leave port under calm conditions and return in a gale.

It may come as a surprise to many, but your VHF radio contains a weather channel, which is updated every three hours (Channel 1 – 6). Now, this weather channel is not just your basic weather, it's a marine forecast, which means you get the waves (not for the San Francisco Bay and Delta) and wind as well and small craft advisories.

### Small Craft Advisory

There is no definitive definition of a "small craft" in a small craft advisory (SCA). An SCA is meant as a "guide" for mariners. For instance, if you were traveling in a 38-foot offshore racer in San Pablo Bay on a bad day, and were an excellent skipper, you (and your vessel) will take a pounding, regardless of the skipper's proficiency at operating the vessel. Take a 38-foot single-screw trawler out in the same conditions and you're likely to



have a much better day because this type of vessel was designed for rough open ocean travel.

Small craft advisory is based on winds: 21 to 33 knots for a sustained 2 hours and/or seas that are "squared." For example, if the seas were running at 9 feet with a 10-second period, there would NOT be an SCA. However, if the seas were running at 9 feet with a 9-second period, there would be an SCA since the seas and period are "squared." If the seas are 15 feet or greater regardless of the period, an SCA will be issued. For the San Francisco Bar, the criteria are a little different due to the dangerous nature of the location. If the seas are 10 feet or greater regardless of the period, an SCA for "Rough Bar Conditions" will be issued.

There are three small craft advisories:

- For wind or wind and seas (general SCA).
- For seas only (SCA for Seas).
- For the San Francisco Bar (SCA for Rough Bar Conditions). The San Francisco Bar is located just outside the Golden Gate Bridge and consists of the Four-fathom Bank (commonly known as the Potato Patch) and the South Shoal (just west of Ocean Beach).

In addition to these advisories, there is a “Dense Fog Advisory.”



## A Conversation with an NWS Representative

To find out more about what the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is up to these days I contacted the Marine Focal Point and a Lead Forecaster at the National Weather Service (NWS) office in Monterey, CA., Mr. Mark Strobin. Mark has been with the NWS since 1994, serving in a variety of positions in various offices around the country.

### **Mission Statement:**

The National Weather Service (NWS) provides weather, hydrologic, and climate forecasts and warnings for the United States, its territories, adjacent waters and ocean areas, for the protection of life and property and the enhancement of the national

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economy. NWS data and products form a national information database and infrastructure that can be used by other governmental agencies, the private sector, the public, and the global community.”

**Kevo:** Where does the National Weather Service fit in the Federal Government?

**Mark:** The National Weather Service is part of NOAA (National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration), which is part of the Department of Commerce. Why is the National Weather Service part of the Dept. of Commerce? Weather has a large impact on the commerce of the U.S. On a large scale, the Midwest floods will affect the price of certain crops such as corn due to flooding of the fields, which would then affect the consumer's price at the store. Locally, if we issue Gale and Storm Warnings for the ocean just outside the Golden Gate or for San Francisco Bay, those warnings could affect shipping going into Oakland Harbor affecting many businesses. On a personal level, Kevin, if we issue Gale or Storm Warnings that might affect your business delivering vessels in the Bay and Delta, your business would be affected as well as your customers.

**Kevo:** What is the scope of operations for the National Weather Service office of operations in Monterey?

**Mark:** We issue forecasts for public, fire, weather, aviation, marine interests, as well as all Watches/Advisories/Warnings for more hazardous weather like flooding,

damaging winds and critical fire weather. Our Marine Forecasts cover the waters from Point Arena to Point Piedras Blancas out to 60 nautical miles. We also forecast for the San Francisco Bay and West Delta and Monterey Bay.

**Kevo:** Where's the best place for recreational mariners to get weather forecast info?

**Mark:** Our homepage has all the latest forecasts in a couple of different formats. Our webpage is at: [weather.gov/sanfrancisco](http://weather.gov/sanfrancisco). From there you can click on our webpage and get the text marine forecast. Or you can click on “marine” under forecasts on the blue column on the left, then click on “Point Forecast Matrix Interface” under Coastal Marine Forecasts in the center of the page. On this page you can click anywhere and get a three-hour tabular forecast for that particular site.

Mariner's love this site... they get a very specific forecast instead of the more general text forecast and find it much more useful.

## Kevo's Tips:

I rely on the Point Forecast Matrix Interface page on the Weather Service website to make my decision to go or not. It gives me a “trend analysis” to see if the seas are getting larger or smaller by giving me a spreadsheet on nautical conditions every three hours.

Although the marine weather in NorCal is more predictable than many other locales around the nation, there are still uncertainties that need to be addressed by all responsible recreational mariners. Understanding where to obtain and how to interpret marine weather forecasts is critical to the safety of the vessel and more importantly, those onboard. Check weather conditions before embarking and if you have any doubts, consider aborting the voyage.

**As always, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or [kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com](mailto:kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com). ☞**

## Advisories and Warnings

### Small Craft Advisory:

21-33 knots

### Gale Warning:

34-47 knots

### Storm Warning:

48-63 knots

### Hurricane Force:

64 knots or greater

### Small Craft Advisory:

Square seas or steeper

### High Surf Advisory:

15-foot waves

### High Surf Warning:

20-foot waves

