



CRS Report for Congress

Clean Water Act: Legislation Concerning Discharges from Recreational Boats

Claudia Copeland
Specialist in Resource and Environmental Policy
Resources, Science, and Industry Division

Summary

The Environmental Protection Agency is attempting to develop a regulatory response to a 2006 federal court ruling that vacated a long-standing rule that exempts discharges associated with the normal operation of vessels from permit requirements of the Clean Water Act. Concern that this ruling could require millions of recreational boaters to obtain permits has led to the introduction of legislation to exempt such vessels from water quality regulation. This report discusses background to the issue, six bills (S. 2067/H.R. 2550, S. 2766/H.R. 5949, and S. 2645/H.R. 5594), and draft permits proposed by EPA on June 17.

In the 110th Congress, legislation concerning the applicability of certain environmental regulatory requirements to recreational boats has been introduced. Two bills are titled the Clean Boating Act of 2008 (S. 2766, Senator Bill Nelson and Senator Boxer; and H.R. 5949, Representative LaTourette). These identical bills have been ordered reported by Senate and House committees. Legislation titled the Recreational Boating Act of 2007 also has been introduced (S. 2067, Senator Martinez; and H.R. 2550, Representative Taylor¹). Two other bills are the Vessel Discharge Evaluation and Review Act (S. 2645, Senator Stevens, and H.R. 5594, Representative Young²).

These bills are intended to address an issue that has arisen in implementation of the Clean Water Act (CWA). In 2006, a federal court ordered the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to revise a CWA regulation that currently exempts discharges from the normal operation of all vessels from the act's permit requirements.³ The bills seek to

¹ S. 2067 includes several stylistic and formatting differences from H.R. 2550, but the bills are similar enough that they are considered together in this report.

² These bills are not identical, but are substantially similar and are discussed together in this report.

³ *Northwest Environmental Advocates v. EPA*, No. C 03-05760 SI (N.D.Cal. September 18, 2006).

exempt an estimated 13 million recreational vessels from new rules that EPA will promulgate in response to the court order.

The federal court order would reverse EPA policy in effect since 1973, in a rule that excluded discharges incidental to the normal operation of vessels from CWA permitting requirements. Under the court's order, EPA must revoke the regulatory exemption by September 30, 2008. The government has appealed the federal court's order, but in case the appeal is unsuccessful, on June 17 EPA proposed two draft CWA permits to respond to the court's mandate. While the focus of the legal challenge was principally to EPA's permitting exemption for ballast water discharges from vessels,⁴ the court's ruling — and its mandate to EPA to rescind the regulatory exemption — applies fully to other types of vessel discharges that are covered by the exemption, such as graywater and bilge water.⁵ Barring judicial or legislative relief, EPA will be required to promulgate a CWA permitting program by September 30. If it gets relief, EPA can be expected to cease developing CWA rules for vessel discharges and retain the existing CWA regulatory exemption from permit requirements.

Background: Clean Water Act Requirements

The Clean Water Act is the principal federal law concerned with pollutant discharges to the nation's surface waters, including rivers and streams, lakes, estuaries, and coastal waters. Section 301(a) of this act provides that “the discharge of any pollutant by any person shall be unlawful” unless the discharge is in compliance with certain other sections of the act. The CWA defines “discharge of a pollutant” as “(A) any addition of any pollutant to navigable waters from any point source, (B) any addition of any pollutant to the waters of the contiguous zone or the ocean from any point source other than a vessel or other floating craft” (33 U.S.C. § 1362(12)). Various courts have held that biological organisms, such as bacteria (e.g., fecal coliform), algae, dead fish, live fish, fish remains, and plant materials are considered pollutants under this definition. A point source is a “discernible, confined and discrete conveyance” and includes a “vessel or other floating craft” (33 U.S.C. § 1362(14)). However, discharges of sewage from vessels are expressly excluded from the definition of “pollutant” (33 U.S.C. § 1362(6)(A)), and sewage discharges from vessels are regulated under a separate provision of the act that concerns marine sanitation devices (33 U.S.C. § 1322). The term “discharge incidental to the normal operation of a vessel” is defined in this provision (33 U.S.C. § 1322(a)(12)).

⁴ Ballast water is stored in tanks on large ships such as tankers and cruise ships to provide stability. It is essential to the proper functioning of ships (especially cargo ships), because the water that is taken in compensates for changes in the ship's weight as cargo is loaded or unloaded, and as fuel and supplies are consumed. However, ballast water discharges typically contain a variety of biological materials, including plants, animals, viruses, and bacteria. These materials often include non-native, nuisance, exotic species that can cause extensive ecological and economic damage to aquatic ecosystems. For information, see CRS Report RL32344, *Ballast Water Management to Combat Invasive Species*, by Eugene H. Buck.

⁵ Graywater is wastewater from the sinks, showers, galleys, laundry, and cleaning activities aboard a ship. Bilge water is water that collects in the lowest inner part of the ship's hull. It is frequently contaminated with oil and other lubricants from the engine room.

One way a pollutant may be lawfully discharged without violating the section 301 prohibition is to obtain a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit (33 U.S.C. § 1342). Under section 402(a), EPA or a qualified state may “issue a permit for the discharge of any pollutant, or combination of pollutants, notwithstanding section 301(a)” upon meeting certain conditions required by the act (33 U.S.C. § 1342(a)). Discharging pollutants into waters of the United States without a permit, or in violation of the terms of a permit, can subject a source to the act’s enforcement provisions, which include fines and penalties (33 U.S.C. § 1319).

In 1973, EPA promulgated a regulation that excluded discharges incidental to the normal operation of vessels from NPDES permitting requirements. That rule, at 40 CFR §122.3(a), excludes from permitting “any discharge of sewage from vessels, effluent from properly functioning marine engines, laundry, shower, and galley sink wastes, or any other discharge incidental to the normal operation of a vessel.” The exemption applies to vessels of all sizes, whether motorized or not. At the time, EPA stated its belief that “[T]his type of discharge generally causes little pollution and exclusion of vessel wastes from the permit requirements will reduce administrative costs drastically.”⁶

This long-standing EPA regulation was subject to legal challenge in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California. In 2005 the court found that Congress had directly expressed its intention that discharges from vessels be regulated under the CWA, and that the regulation at issue contradicted that intention. In September 2006 the court issued a final order that will vacate (revoke) the regulatory exclusion in 40 CFR §122.3(a) as of September 30, 2008.⁷ The district court rejected EPA’s contention that Congress had previously acquiesced in exempting the “normal operation” of vessels from CWA permitting and disagreed with EPA’s argument that the court’s two-year deadline creates practical difficulties for the agency and the affected industry. Unless the district court’s ruling is overturned, after September 30, discharges of pollutants incidental to the normal operation of a vessel that had formerly been exempted from NPDES permitting will be subject to prohibitions in CWA section 301 against the discharge of a pollutant without a permit. Although EPA has appealed the court’s decision to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals,⁸ it initiated steps seeking public comment on permitting of discharges that are incidental to the normal operation of ships and on June 17 proposed two NPDES permits in response to the court’s order (discussed below).⁹ EPA estimates that the universe of vessels potentially affected by the court’s order and proposed permits could include over

⁶ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System,” 38 *Federal Register* 98, May 22, 1973, p. 13528. Although this regulatory exemption from NPDES permitting includes discharges of sewage from vessels, as discussed previously, these discharges are regulated pursuant to CWA Section 312 and regulations at 40 CFR Part 140, which do not use a permitting program. The federal court’s order vacating 40 CFR § 122.3(a) will not affect EPA’s method of regulating sewage discharges from vessels.

⁷ See footnote 3.

⁸ Oral argument on the appeal occurred on August 14, 2007 (*Northwest Environmental Advocates v. EPA*, No. 03-74795/06-17187, CA 9).

⁹ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Draft National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) General Permits for Discharges Incidental to the Normal Operation of Vessels,” 73 *Federal Register* 117, June 17, 2008, pp. 34296-343049.

13 million recreational boats and 98,000 commercial fishing, passenger, cargo and other vessels operating in U.S. waters.

Legislative Proposals

The pending bills seek to statutorily exempt recreational vessels from any CWA permitting requirement that EPA might adopt in response to the federal district court's order. They reflect three approaches: (1) modifying a CWA definition to exempt discharges from recreational vessels, (2) modifying the CWA to exempt recreational vessel discharges from permitting and directing EPA to issue performance standards for discharges incidental to the normal operation of vessels; and (3) directing the Coast Guard to issue national performance standards for such discharges, but exempting recreational and certain commercial vessels from such requirements.

The first approach is reflected in S. 2067 and H.R. 2550. These bills would amend the definitions provision of the CWA (Section 502, 33 U.S.C. § 1362) to define a "recreational vessel" and to detail the types of discharges from such vessels that would not be defined as pollutants under the act, and therefore would be exempt from permitting. Under these bills, the term "recreational vessel" is defined to mean a vessel that is "manufactured for operation, or operated, primarily for recreational purposes," or that is "leased, rented, or chartered to an individual for recreational purposes." The types of exempt discharges from such vessels would be defined in the CWA to include:

any deck runoff from a recreational vessel, any engine cooling water, gray water, bilge water effluent from properly functioning recreational marine engines, laundry, shower, and galley sink wastes from a recreational vessel, or any other discharge incidental to the normal operation of a recreational vessel; except that this subparagraph does not apply to rubbish, trash, garbage, or other such materials discharged overboard by a recreational vessel.

S. 2766 and H.R. 5949, reflecting the second approach, contain a generally similar provision defining discharges incidental to the normal operation of recreational vessels that would be statutorily exempt from permitting. In defining "recreational vessel," these bills include boats manufactured or used primarily for pleasure or boats leased, rented, or chartered to a person for the pleasure of that person. The provision in these bills would amend the permitting provision of the CWA (Section 402, 33 U.S.C. § 1342), not the definitions provision. Different from S. 2067 and H.R. 2550, S. 2766 and H.R. 5949 include no language saying that the permitting exemption does not apply to discharges of "rubbish, trash, garbage or other such materials." Also unlike S. 2067 and H.R. 2550, these bills further state that the term does not include a vessel that is subject to Coast Guard inspection and that is "engaged in commercial use" or "carries paying passengers" (e.g., ferries or cruise ships).

S. 2766 and H.R. 5949 (unlike S. 2067 and H.R. 2550) would add provisions concerning management practices for discharges from recreational vessels. As a result of these provisions, while recreational vessels (as defined in the legislation) would be exempt from permitting requirements, they could become subject to regulations mandating management practices to control discharges.

Section 4 of S. 2766 and H.R. 5949 directs EPA, in consultation with the Coast Guard, the Department of Commerce, and interested states to develop management practices for discharges other than sewage from such vessels. It identifies several factors to be considered by EPA, such as the nature and environmental effects of the discharge, the practicability of using a management practice, applicable federal and state laws and international standards, and cost. After developing management practices, EPA would be required to promulgate federal standards of performance for each. These standards could distinguish among classes, types, and sizes of recreational vessels, and also between new and existing vessels. The standards could allow for waivers “as necessary or appropriate to a particular class, type, age, or size of vessel.” Finally, the Coast Guard would be required to promulgate regulations incorporating the EPA standards of performance. After the effective date of these regulations, a recreational vessel could neither operate nor discharge in violation of the regulations.

The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee approved S. 2766 without amendment on May 21. The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee approved H.R. 5949, also without amendment, on May 15. Subsequently, on June 12, a House Transportation subcommittee held a hearing on vessel discharge issues, including whether commercial as well as recreational boats should be exempted from permit requirements.

A third approach to the issue is reflected in S. 2645 and H.R. 5594, which would exempt recreational and certain other vessels from regulation. Unlike the previously discussed bills, these measures would give primary responsibility to address vessel discharges to the Coast Guard, not EPA. The legislation would not amend the CWA, but it would in part amend the Nonindigenous Aquatic Nuisance Prevention and Control Act (NANPCA, 16 U.S.C. § 4701 et seq.). Under NANPCA, the Coast Guard is responsible for developing and implementing a program to prevent the unintentional introduction and dispersal of nuisance aquatic species into U.S. waters from ship ballast water.

S. 2645 and H.R. 5594 direct the Coast Guard to study and report on vessel discharges that are incidental to the normal operation of vessels, other than aquatic nuisance species, including types of discharges, the nature and extent of potential effects on human health and the environment, and an analysis of control technologies or best management practices. Based on the study, the Coast Guard is to promulgate and enforce uniform national discharge standards. S. 2645 and H.R. 5594 would suspend any permit requirement for discharges incidental to the normal operation of vessels promulgated under any other provision of law (i.e., the legislation would supersede any CWA permits issued by EPA). After promulgation of the Coast Guard standards, states would be preempted from establishing separate laws or rules, but states could prohibit such discharges in areas where needed for greater environmental protection.

Under S. 2645 and H.R. 5594, the following discharges incidental to the normal operation of vessels would be exempt from the new Coast Guard rules: discharges from recreational vessels (defined in the same manner as in the CWA bills discussed above);¹⁰ discharges from commercial vessels less than 79 feet in length; discharges from fishing vessels and fish tender vessels (H.R. 5594 only); discharges of aquatic nuisance species

¹⁰ S. 2645 limits the exemption to recreational vessels less than 79 feet in length; H.R. 5594 has no such limit.

in ballast water that is subject to NANPCA; and certain other specified discharges, such as those associated with vessels conducting aquatic research, or those needed to secure the safety of a vessel. The term “discharge incidental to the normal operation of a vessel” would be defined as in CWA Section 312 (33 U.S.C. § 1322(a)(12)).

EPA Response: Two General Permits are Proposed

On June 17, while waiting for the court of appeals or Congress to provide relief from the district court’s order, EPA proposed two CWA permits that it believes could be finalized by September 30.¹¹ They are general permits that would apply in all states; generally, EPA authorizes states to administer the issuance and enforcement of NPDES permits, in lieu of EPA. In this case, however, EPA would be the permitting entity.

One permit (the Recreational General Permit, or RGP) would give permit coverage to recreational vessels less than 79 feet in length, including motorboats, sailboats, recreational fishing boats, rowboats, etc., comprising an estimated 13 million domestic boats. Discharges incidental to the normal operation of these vessels covered by the draft permit include toxic (mainly copper from anti-fouling paints and detergents) and conventional pollutants from deck runoff, bilgewater, non-contact engine coolant and small boat engine wet exhaust, leachate from anti-foulant hull coatings, and fuel tank overflows. The permit would require recreational boat owners to use several management practices intended to minimize or reduce pollutants of concern, such as requiring use of phosphorus-free soap, minimizing the discharge and transfer of visible organisms that could spread invasive species, and managing on-board trash. Recreational boats would be automatically covered by the permit and would not have to apply to EPA or submit a Notice of Intent to be covered by the permit. There would be no permit fees. EPA estimates that the maximum national compliance cost would be \$88 million, or \$26 per boat per year.

The second permit (the Vessel General Permit, or VGP) would give permit coverage to commercial and large recreational vessels. This is a more complex permit than the RGP, because it covers eight large categories of vessels. EPA identified 28 categories of waste streams from the normal operation of these vessels (some are not applicable to all vessel types). The permit proposes that most would be controlled by specific best management practices, many of which are already practiced. Some categories, such as cruise ships, would be subject to more detailed requirements. Vessels would be subject to certain monitoring and annual reporting requirements. EPA estimates that the universe of vessels subject to this permit is 98,645 (including about 7,900 foreign flagged vessels). Those that are larger than 79 feet or more than 300 gross tons (53,000 vessels) would be required to submit a Notice of Intent to be covered by the permit. Others would be automatically covered. As with the RGP, there would be no permit fees. Projected compliance costs range from a low of \$8.2 million to \$26.2 million annually; they vary based on assumptions of vessel populations affected and the number of instances in which incremental costs will be incurred.

The public comment period on the draft permits closes on August 1, 2008.

¹¹ See footnote 9. The permit texts, detailed fact sheets, and economic and environmental benefit analysis documents are available at [http://cfpub.epa.gov/npdes/home.cfm?program_id=350].