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Boat owners asked to act early and be vigilant for petrol system problems

Boaters whose boats have petrol engines need to take more care to avoid of the dangers of petrol vapour 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 are asking that owners of petrol engined boats take a simple, planned approach to keep themselves safe and keep alert to any signs of a petrol leak in the fuel system before it develops into something threatening,' said Graham Watts, the Boat Safety Scheme Manager

He added: 'Appropriately constructed and well maintained petrol systems are safe, but boaters shouldn't fall into the trap of applying the modern road vehicle experience of never lifting the bonnet; just turning the key and then setting off.

The BSS worried that too many boaters, especially recent entrants, may not realise that if petrol leaks, weeps or drips, 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

With petrol engines often located close to spark generating equipment, it is not difficult to see how such a vapour/air mix could ignite easily. This combustion is both rapid and powerful and in the wrong circumstances, the skipper, crew and possibly bystanders can be in danger. More people are hurt in petrol vapour ignitions than any other cause of boat fires.

Here are some BSS tips for owners of petrol boats to stay safe from fire and explosion.

- Plan ahead and well before the season starts, take a look around the boat, especially the whole petrol supply system from filling point to carburettor or fuel injectors. By sight, touch and smell, check for signs of damage, deterioration, looseness, cracks, weeping and leaks.
- Before each use check fuel pipes, joints, hoses, fuel tank connections, and other fuel components that should have special attention as all are points for potential leaks.
- Do it again whenever you fill the tank; the extra weight and pressure of the fuel may reveal leaks or weeps that may not be there with less fuel.
- Outboard owners can open up the cowling and look for any otherwise hidden problems.
- Crucially, before turning the battery isolator switch and turning the key, have a good sniff around, if there's a strong smell of petrol, don't attempt to start the engine.

- Even when underway, if the engine is not firing or runs very poorly, stop and take stock, because a badly running engine may be a sign that your safety is compromised.

Even with the family standing on the bank and your provisions boxes getting warm in the sun, if you find a leak or there's a strong smell of petrol, don't be tempted to start the boat. Open up the windows and hatches and ventilate until the smell has gone away, then investigate. If you can't fix the problem quickly and easily, pack the boat down and get a competent fitter to put it right so you can enjoy your boat for your next available weekend.

As always, prevention is the best cure, as a routine, have a competent marine fitter carry out a thorough service of the engine, fuel-system components and controls using marine grade parts when replacements are needed – it could make the difference between a great day out with the family, or swift race to the hospital and no boating for some time afterwards.

There is more information on the safe use of petrol 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. Three petrol-engined boats exploded on family trips in May last year.

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.