

Mandatory Life Jacket Study/Test

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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SUMMARY

In April 2007, MG Don Riley, then Director of Civil Works, tasked the HQUSACE National Operations Center for Water Safety to conduct a study on the benefits and impacts of establishing a policy which would require visitors to wear life jackets while recreating on Corps-managed waters. Under further direction from MG Riley in March 2008, Vicksburg and Pittsburgh Districts were selected to conduct a three-year mandatory life jacket study/test. Test implementation and data tracking for the first two test sites were initiated with the 2009 recreation season. Further test expansion in 2010 brought Sacramento District into the study as well. Studies in all three test regions will wrap up at the end of 2011 recreation season.

BACKGROUND

The Corps established the National Operations Center for Water Safety (NOC) in 1995 to develop strategies, programs and products to help reduce the number of water-related fatalities at Corps projects. The NOC implemented an aggressive public water safety campaign with education products and effective partnerships which has contributed to an overall reduction in fatalities from over 450/year in the early 1970s to an average of about 150 per year.

In an effort to further reduce the number of fatalities, the DCW directed the Corps to conduct a study to determine the feasibility of establishing a federal regulation (modify Title 36) to require the public to wear life jackets while on the water.



Vicksburg (MVD) and Pittsburg (LRD) Districts volunteered to conduct the three-year test beginning in 2009. Sacramento (SPD) District volunteered one lake for further testing in 2011 in response to MG Riley's request for test expansion.

The US Coast Guard agreed to conduct a wear rate study at all test lakes located within both test districts throughout the entire test period. However, USCG did not continue wear rate observations in Pittsburgh District in 2010 or 2011; instead they shifted manpower for their wear rate study to Pine Flat Lake in Sacramento District once it was announced they had joined the USACE study.



USACE Study Lakes

Region	Test Lakes	Control Lakes
Pittsburgh Test	Youghiogheny River Lake Shenango River Lake (All Western PA)	Berlin Lake (OH) Tygart Lake (WV)
Vicksburg Test	Grenada Lake Enid Lake Arkabutla Lake Sardis Lake (Mississippi)	Ross R. Barnett Reservoir Bay Springs Lake (Mississippi)
Sacramento Test	Pine Flat Lake (Central CA)	Millerton Lake (Central CA)

Policies by USACE Test Region

Site	Non-motorized	Boats Less than 16 feet	Boats 16-26 feet	Boats greater than 26 feet	Swimming	Enforcement period
Pittsburgh District	Less than 16 feet	At all times	No policy	No policy	Non-swimmers	Permanently adopted in 1990
Vicksburg District	At all times regardless of size	At all times	When under main propulsion	No policy	When outside designated area	May 2009 – 31 Oct 2011
Sacramento District (Pine Flat Lake)	At all times regardless of size	At all times	When under main propulsion (with exception)	When under main propulsion (with exception)	When 100' from shore (Ca law)	April 2011– 31 Oct 2011

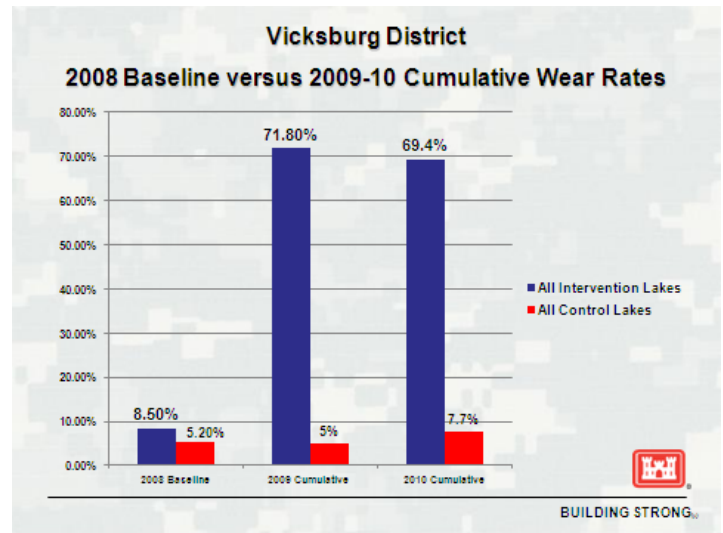
Validation Study

University of Mississippi has conducted wear rate observations on the Vicksburg District test lakes as validation to the JSI information being reliable. Observation totals from both observation groups have shown consistency throughout the 2009 and 2010 test years.

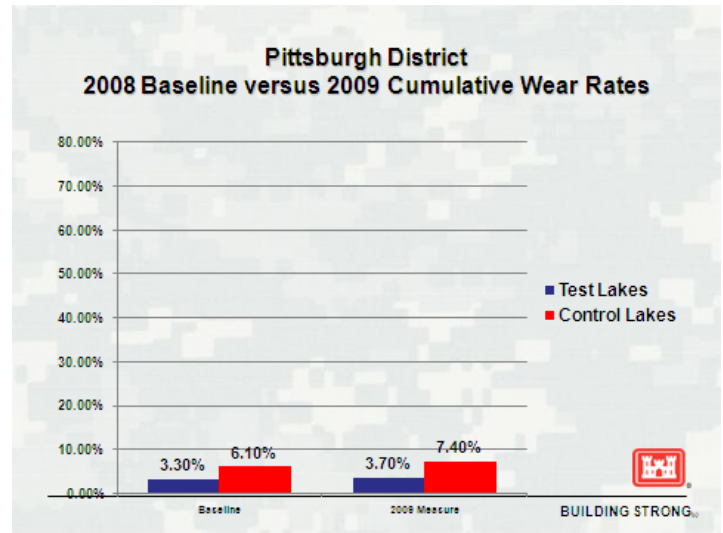
Slippery Rock University has been requested to conduct wear rate observations for the Pittsburgh District test lakes during 2011 recreation season; however, no commitment is in place at the time of this writing.

CURRENT STATUS

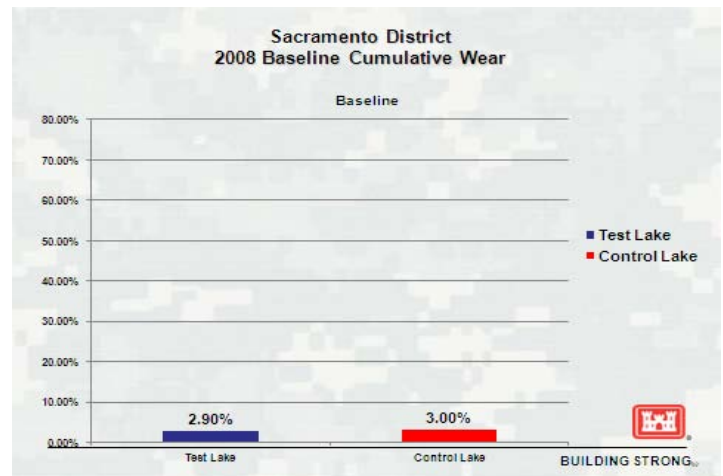
Vicksburg District - During both of the test years (2009 and 2010) conducted to date in the Vicksburg District, life jacket wear rates have increased from less than 10% (baseline data gathered in 2008) to over 70% at all four Mississippi test lakes. The nearby control lakes, where no policy was applied, continued to show wear rates of less than 10% during those same test years.



Pittsburg District – In that the district had adopted their life jacket policy in 1990, it was surprising to discover that wear rates on the test lakes were only about 3.3% during the 2008 recreation season. Wear rates in the first test year, 2009, showed very little change; final results showed that only 3.7% of visitors on the test lakes wore life jackets. Nearby control lakes, where no policy was applied, showed more significant increase. Based on perceived lack of engagement by the Pittsburgh District ranger and/or state water patrols, USCG opted to discontinue wear rate observations in that region. The policy, without being actively worked, had gone stale in the regions and there was apparent complacency on the part of both Corps and state patrol staffs.



Sacramento District – Pine Flat Lake, located in the central valley of California, was volunteered for the test based on an active recreational base and location near a fairly large metropolitan area, Fresno. Baseline observations were gathered during the 2010 recreation season for comparative data to the 2011 policy test. Voluntary wear rates at the lake and nearby control lake were about 3%, less than the national average. Enforcement activities will begin 1 April 2011.



KEY POINTS:

- HQUSACE recognizes its public safety responsibility. The majority of visitors who come to Corps facilities come to be on, in, or near the water, a fact that has focused our recreational safety attention to boating and water safety education since the mid-1970's. USACE has literally invested millions of dollars in this effort. While earliest annual campaigns showed dramatic effect on reducing the number of recreational fatalities, that downward trend has leveled off over the past decade, despite vigilance by our park rangers and aggressive efforts in educational outreach.
- Nearly 2,000 boaters and swimmers have died in recreational accidents on US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) managed waters since 1998. Greater than 90% of those victims were not wearing a life jacket. Incidents involving boating and swimming in non-designated areas account for the majority of the fatalities.
- The US Army Corps of Engineers opted to conduct a life jacket policy test to measure the feasibility of the agency adopting a life jacket wear requirement for recreation occurring on Corps-managed waters. The policy is being enforced on limited test lakes included in the study under CFR Title 36 Section 327.12(a), posted restrictions.
- Study measurements include, but are not limited to: wear rates pre-and-post policy test; recreation effects; budget and staffing implications; public, stakeholders and Congressional reactions/actions; and agency costs of not having policy.
- Comments from public, stakeholders and other agencies are being encouraged for the study group's consideration. All input will be compiled and included in the final review. A partner/stakeholders meeting is planned for final discussions prior to the final report being completed. That meeting will likely be scheduled in Washington, DC at USACE Headquarters sometime in November 2011.
- Decision briefing with study team's recommendations to the Commander is tentatively planned for December 2011 or later.

Comments either favoring or opposing life jacket policy can be sent to the following address or email.

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