



"It's not polite to point" – U.S. bans the use of laser pointers at sea

New U.S. Coast Guard regulations banning the use of laser pointers or devices by vessel crews when the laser beam is used to strike a vessel operating in US navigable waters, have no exception for distress situations.

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For many years, there have been numerous bans worldwide on aiming laser pointers or devices at aircraft for obvious reasons of aviation safety. A pilot temporarily blinded by a laser beam could lead to disorientation and a disastrous crash.

Now, in the U.S., the same reasoning has led the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) to issue regulations under a statute passed on 1 January 2021, banning the use of laser pointers or devices by vessel crews, when the laser beam is used to strike a vessel operating in US navigable waters [Title 46 U.S.C. 70014].

This is stricter than the aviation regulation, which permits laser pointers to be used for a distress signal. The USCG version has no such exception for distress situations, although it only bans their use when the beam “strikes” a vessel.

This regulation apparently puts an end to the use of fan beam laser ‘flares’ in the US. Although they had been on the market in both the US and the UK, the devices will apparently no longer be considered by the USCG as either a ‘distress signal’ or a ‘signal to attract attention’, as defined in the COLREGS.

Interestingly, the regulation exempts USCG vessels and aircraft from its application, and they can continue to use laser pointers themselves, which they occasionally do for their work in rescue and law enforcement.

The regulation was enacted after numerous reports in recent years of USCG vessels and aircraft, being struck by laser beams while operating off the coasts of California, Florida, Alaska, Washington and Oregon. The lasers interfere with their missions and potentially cause safety concerns as well as health risks to the vessels’ crews.

The violation of the statute risks a conviction for a felony offense, resulting in imprisonment up to a maximum 25 years. A civil monetary penalty can also be levied of up to USD 25,000.

As these laser points are devices that are used by mariners in many situations, it is important that vessel crews be aware that these laser beam devices should not be used in US waters at all, and should be kept stowed away when navigating in water near the United States.

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