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About the Harbor Safety Committee

In 1990, The California State Legislature enacted the Oil Spill Prevention and Response Act (OSPRA). The goals of OSPRA are to improve the prevention, removal, abatement, response, containment and clean up and mitigation of oil spills in the marine waters of California. The Act (SB 2040) created harbor safety committees for the major harbors of the State of California to plan “for the safe navigation and operation of tankers, barges, and other vessels within each harbor... (by preparing)... a harbor safety plan, encompassing all vessel traffic within the harbor.” The Harbor Safety Committee of the San Francisco Bay Region was officially sworn in on September 18, 1991 and held its first meeting on that date. The original Harbor Safety Plan for San Francisco, San Pablo and Suisun Bays was adopted on August 13, 1992. SB 2040 mandates that the Harbor Safety Committee must annually review its previously adopted Harbor Safety Plan and recommendations and submit the annual review to the OSPR Administrator for comment.

The full committee for the Harbor Safety Committee holds regular monthly public meetings. The committee chairperson appoints a series of work groups to review the mandated components of the Harbor safety Plan and timely issues. All committee and work group meetings are noticed to the public. Public comments are received throughout discussions of the various issues, which results in full public participation in developing the Harbor Safety Plan recommendations of the San Francisco Bay Region.

The San Francisco Harbor Safety Plan encompasses a series of connecting bays, including the San Francisco, San Pablo and Suisun Bays, and the Sacramento River to the Port of Sacramento and the San Joaquin River to the Port of Stockton. It is almost one hundred miles from the San Francisco lighted horn buoy outside of the Bay to the Ports of Sacramento or Stockton. The 548-square-mile Bay has an irregular 1,000-mile shoreline composed of a variety of urban and suburban areas, marshes and salt ponds. Several significant islands are within the Bay, including Angel Island, Alcatraz Island, Yerba Buena Island and Treasure Island.

The San Francisco Bay system is the largest estuary along the Pacific Coast of North and South America. Waters from the two major river systems and the Bay flow through a single opening at the Golden Gate Bridge, which is less than one mile wide at its narrowest point. Because of the volume of water moving through the narrow opening on a daily basis, strong tides and currents occur in the Bay. While the Bay is extremely deep (356 feet) by the Golden Gate Bridge because of the swiftly moving volume of water, the Bay is very shallow at its extremities and subject to sedimentation from the rivers emptying into the Bay. Sediment is deposited outside the entrance to the San Francisco Bay where a semicircular bar extends out into the Pacific Ocean. A dredged Main Ship Channel allows deep-draft ships to navigate into the Bay. About two-thirds of the Bay is less than 18 feet deep. The Bay is significantly more shallow due to human alteration. Over one hundred years ago, the Bay was larger and deeper prior to the gold mining era. Hydraulic miners pumped vast quantities of muddy tailings silting the streams, rivers and Bay system. As a result, the present Bay has widely varying depths. The Bay bottom is predominantly mud.

The Bay has a number of hazards to navigation, such as strong tides and currents and variable bottom depths, which confine large vessels to specified shipping lanes within the Bay. Navigating the Bay becomes more complex during periods of restricted visibility due to winter storms and fog during the spring months when heavy runoff from melting snows floods the river systems, which drain the Bay. The San Francisco Bar Pilots regularly compile recommended guidelines for safe navigation:

[SF Bar Pilots Operation Guidelines for Vessel Movements \(updated 2019-05\)](#)

The guidelines are sent to members of the shipping industry and are based on a general consensus among pilots as to recommended navigational practices.

The natural harbor of the Bay serves the shipping and fishing industries. There are eight ports, twenty-one marine terminals and naval facilities at Concord Naval Weapons Station and Moffett Field. Military and contracted commercial vessels move explosives to the Concord Naval Weapons Station along the Contra Costa/Solano Counties shoreline. Because water depths near the refineries in Contra Costa and Solano Counties cannot safely accommodate larger oil tankers, these tankers lighter oil to smaller tankers or barges to move cargo in Bay to marine terminals. In addition, an expanding ferry system annually makes over 71,000 (1997) trips, mainly to and from San Francisco in the central part of the Bay. Because much of the Bay shoreline is urbanized, recreational boating and the growing

MARINE EXCHANGE OF THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY REGION

sport of boardsailing are popular with an estimated 20,000 boat berths around the Bay, exclusive of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers.

The shipping industry is a particularly vital part of the Bay Area economy. Shipping spokesmen estimate that approximately 100,000 jobs are dependent upon the shipping industry and that the industry contributes \$4.5 billion to the economy.

Thus, vessel traffic in the Bay consists of a complex variety of inbound and outbound vessels, wholly in Bay vessel movements, tugs, government vessels, passenger ferry ships, recreational boats, commercial and sport fishing boats, board sailors, and personal watercraft (jet skis) within a series of bays, channels and rivers that comprise the San Francisco Bay planning area.