Rule 6: Safe Speed

The Rule: Every vessel shall at all times proceed at a safe speed so that she can take proper and effective action to avoid collision and be stopped within a distance appropriate to the prevailing circumstances and conditions. In determining a safe speed, the following factors shall be among those taken into account:

(a) By all vessels:

(i) The state of visibility;
(ii) The traffic density including concentrations of fishing vessels or any other vessels;
(iii) The maneuverability of the vessel with special reference to stopping distance and turning ability in the prevailing conditions;
(iv) At night, the presence of background light such as from shore lights or from back scatter from her own lights;
(v) The state of wind, sea and current, and the proximity of navigational hazards;
(vi) The draft in relation to the available depth of water.

(b) Additionally, by vessels with operational radar:

(i) The characteristics, efficiency and limitations of the radar equipment;
(ii) Any constraints imposed by the radar range scale in use;
(iii) The effect on radar detection of the sea state, weather and other sources of interference;
(iv) The possibility that small vessels, ice and other floating objects may not be detected by radar at an adequate range;
(v) The number, location and movement of vessels detected by radar;
(vi) The more exact assessment of the visibility that may be possible when radar is used to determine the range of vessels or other objects in the vicinity.

Discussion: One key part of this Rule for USCG exams is that you will often be required to list one of the particular factors from the Rule, so these factors must be memorized before testing. Safe speed is not listed in knots or any other measure but is left to the mariner. The courts have made determinations in collision cases and it is often quoted that being able to stop in "half the distance of visibility" is a good rule of thumb for safe speed. However, that is not written in the Rules, and there are actually questions with that phrase as an incorrect answer. Safe speed must be continually evaluated and must is a key element in risk assessment and is related to the effectiveness of the lookout system aboard, but operators must consider the listed elements in the Rule. Finally, remember that safe speed applies to speeds both over ground and through the water, and that vessels are responsible for damage their wake causes.

Test Strategy: There are about 10 questions in the database for this Rule. At least the first 6 specific elements should be memorized because questions often ask for specific elements to be named.

Sample Questions:

BOTH INTERNATIONAL AND INLAND. The Rules state that certain factors are to be taken into account when determining safe speed. Which is one of the factors?

A. Temperature
B. Maximum speed of your vessel
C. Radio communications that are available
D. Current

BOTH INTERNATIONAL AND INLAND. When is your vessel travelling at a safe speed as defined in the Rules?

A. When you are traveling slower than surrounding vessels
B. When you can stop within your visibility range
C. When no wake comes from your vessel
D. When you can take proper and effective action to avoid collision

BOTH INTERNATIONAL AND INLAND. The Rules state that a vessel shall be operated at a safe speed at all times so she can be stopped within _____.

A. ½ the distance of visibility
B. The distance that it would require for the propeller to go from full ahead to full astern
C. The distance of visibility
D. A distance appropriate to the existing circumstances and conditions

BOTH INTERNATIONAL AND INLAND. Which factor is listed in the Rules as one which must be taken into account when determining safe speed?

A. The maneuverability of the vessel
B. The construction of the vessel
C. The experience of vessel personnel
D. All of the above must be taken into account