

Safety zones around oil and gas installations in waters around the UK

Introduction

This leaflet explains the purpose and significance of safety zones around offshore oil and gas installations and their effect on marine activities, particularly relating to fishing vessels.

What is a safety zone?

A safety zone is an area extending 500 m from any part of offshore oil and gas installations and is established automatically around all installations which project above the sea at any state of the tide. Subsea installations may also have safety zones, created by statutory instrument, to protect them. These safety zones are 500 m radius from a central point. Vessels of all nations are required to respect them. It is an offence (under section 23 of the Petroleum Act 1987) to enter a safety zone except under the special circumstances outlined below.

Why do we have safety zones?

The purpose of a safety zone is to protect:

- the safety of people working on, or in the immediate vicinity of, the installation; and
- the installation itself against damage.

They also provide the additional benefit of protecting fishermen and other mariners by reducing the risk of collision with the installation and preventing loss of gear which can become snagged on underwater equipment.

How are safety zones made known?

Details of safety zones are found in:

- Hydrographic Office charts;
- Admiralty notices to mariners;
- radio navigation warnings; and
- fortnightly bulletins produced by Kingfisher Information Services at the Seafish Industry Authority in conjunction with the Scottish Government's Marine Directorate (<http://www.seafishmarineservices.com/Kingfisher.htm>).

Admiralty charts should be regularly consulted and kept up to date by reference to Admiralty notices to mariners.

When can safety zones be entered?

Under normal circumstances vessels are prohibited from entering safety zones. However, vessels are not prohibited from entering or remaining in a safety zone in the following circumstances:

- to lay, inspect, test, repair, alter, renew or remove a submarine cable or pipeline in or near that safety zone;
- to provide services for the installation, to transport people or goods to or from the installation, under authorisation of a government department, or to inspect any installation in the safety zone;
- if it belongs to a general lighthouse authority and is performing duties relating to the safety of navigation;
- to save or attempt to save life or property;
- owing to bad weather; or
- when in distress.

A vessel can also enter a safety zone if the safety zone order that created the zone makes provision for it to do so, or with the consent of the Health and Safety Executive.

What are the penalties for infringing a safety zone?

Except in the circumstances listed under the previous heading, a vessel entering a safety zone makes the owner, master or others who have contributed to the offence liable:

- on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum amount, currently £5000; and
- on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years, or to a fine which may be unlimited, or to both.

What types of installation are protected by safety zones?

All installations on the UK Continental Shelf including:

- production and accommodation platforms;
- mobile drilling rigs;
- single point moorings; and
- subsea wellheads and templates (where a safety zone has been established by statutory instrument). Some, but not all, subsea safety zones are marked by light buoys on the surface laid as close as practicable to the centre of the zone.

Offshore development areas

Offshore development areas (ODAs) were introduced in 1980 as a means of advising mariners not to enter particular areas because of the high levels of activity associated with the establishment of offshore installations.

Operators can apply for an ODA for the initial construction phase of a development and ODAs will be granted for a specific period of time only. These are marked on Admiralty Charts and, though entry is not prohibited, mariners are strongly advised to keep outside.

Are all safety zones necessary?

All installations are at risk from collision or damage by seagoing vessels. Installations most at risk are those situated near shipping lanes, from vessels off-course or navigating blind. All installations should be regarded as vulnerable and need the protection which strict observance of the safety zone affords.

Vessels can cause considerable damage and danger to life if they collide with an installation. Even a small fishing vessel can inflict considerable damage. It is advisable for fishing vessels to keep a listening watch on channel 16 VHF when in the vicinity of an installation. In the event that a fishing vessel needs to enter a safety zone to retrieve equipment, the fishing vessel master is advised to contact the offshore installation manager (OIM) prior to entry. The failure to communicate and assess the risks could result in a serious accident, or damage to oil field equipment.

Benefits of safety zones

It is important for all those working in the hostile environment offshore that fishing vessels remain outside safety zones around installations at all times. **If in doubt as to whether an installation is protected by a safety zone, assume that a safety zone exists and keep at least 500 m clear.**

Further information

For information about health and safety, or to report inconsistencies or inaccuracies in this guidance, visit www.hse.gov.uk/. You can view HSE guidance online and order priced publications from the website. HSE priced publications are also available from bookshops.

This guidance is issued by the Health and Safety Executive. Following the guidance is not compulsory and you are free to take other action. But if you do follow the guidance you will normally be doing enough to comply with the law. Health and safety inspectors seek to secure compliance with the law and may refer to this guidance as illustrating good practice.

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