## 2018 Severe Weather Awareness Week

## Tuesday, January 23rd is Marine Hazards and Rip Current Awareness Day

Year after year, rip currents consistently rank at the top of the list of deadliest weather-related hazards in South Florida. Since 1979, rip currents, sometimes erroneously referred to as rip tides or undertows, have claimed more lives in South Florida than any other weather-related hazard combined!

Rip current deaths have decreased over the past 20 years, with the average yearly number of deaths in South Florida decreasing by more than half compared to the previous 20-year period. This can be directly attributed to greater awareness of rip

currents, the life-saving efforts of Ocean Rescue lifeguards, and increased rip current signage and warning flags at areas beaches.

In 2017, four people drowned as a result of rip currents at South Florida beaches, with an additional 15 requiring hospitalization or medical attention. While these numbers are lower than the long-term average, they are still too many. Rip current casualties can occur year-round in the usually-warm South Florida surf, but happen most frequently during the spring break period in March and April as well as during the summer months and on major holiday weekends. These tragic incidents occur almost every year despite rip currents having good public awareness and plenty of media coverage. Why do people still succumb to rip currents?

## WHAT'S A RIP CURRENT?

A rip current is a strong channel of water flowing out past the surf zone that can pull even the strongest swimmer into deeper water beyond the sand bar. Most deaths occur when people caught in the rip current try to swim toward shore directly against the current, become totally exhausted and drown. Sometimes, would-be rescuers also drown. By understanding how a rip current works, people can escape this fate.

Rip currents are occur naturally and can affect virtually all of the surf beaches along the South Florida coast. These currents can pose a big threat to unsuspecting beachgoers. Rip currents can be referred to as the "fair weather killer" because they often occur when the weather appears to be generally nice. All that's required is a moderate to fresh onshore wind on a beautiful, sunny day.

Rip currents are frequently stronger near occur near piers, inlets and jetties and these can be particularly dangerous places to swim especially when rip currents are present. On March 23rd, 2016, an 18-year-old teenager drowned after jumping off a sea wall at the Haulover Inlet and getting caught in a rip current.

Rip currents are normally only about 10 to 30 yards wide and the best escape is usually to wade or swim sideways across the current in a direction following the shoreline until free from the current. Another method of escape is to float with the current out a short distance beyond the breakers, then swim towards the shore once out of the current.
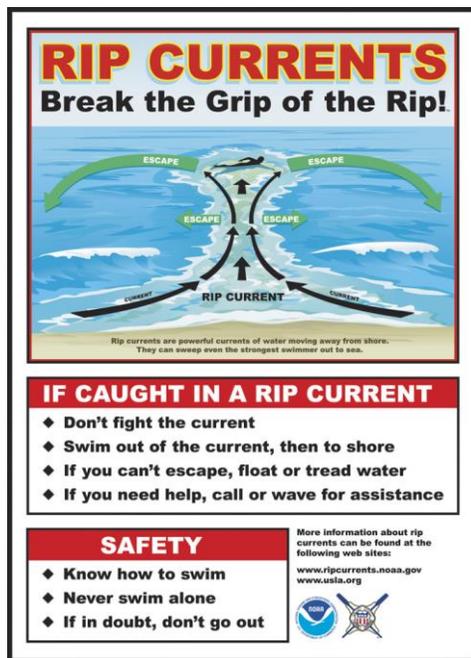
The best way to stay safe and to be informed of the presence of dangerous rip currents is to heed the advice of lifeguards. Make sure you swim at guarded beaches and be aware of the flag color system used by ocean rescue personnel to alert of rip currents. Swimming within clear sight of a lifeguard sharply reduces the chances of drowning. Sadly, the vast majority of rip current drownings take place at unguarded beaches. If you see a red flag at or near the lifeguard stand, strong and dangerous currents are present and you should not enter the water.

Another important way to stay safe is to check the weather and surf conditions before heading to the beach. The National Weather Service in Miami issues daily Hazardous Weather Outlooks, Surf Forecasts and Beach Forecasts which alert the public of expected hazardous marine weather and rip currents. The rip current threat is forecast daily on a scale ranging from low, to moderate, to high. Rip current alerts are issued when the rip current threat is high and are broadcast on NOAA Weather Radio and commercial television and radio, as well posted on the National Weather Service in Miami website at

For further information on rip currents and rip current safety, please visit the National Weather Service's Rip Current Awareness website at www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov.

# BOATING IS FUN, BUT WATCH THE WEATHER!



South Florida's aquamarine waters make it prime boating country. We are surrounded by water on three sides and the third largest fresh water lake in the United States, Lake Okeechobee, sits just north of the Everglades. There is also a vast network of canals, bays and other waterways which cut across the area. These bodies of water are vulnerable to rapid changes in the weather which can occur in South Florida throughout the year. Fast moving thunderstorms are a threat mainly during the summer months but can occur year-round and catch mariners by surprise. Sudden gusts of wind and rough seas associated with local thunderstorms and large swells from distant storms can be strong enough to overturn boats. Cold fronts in the cooler months also bring periods of strong winds and large, rough waves.

It's because of these rapidly-changing conditions that vessel operators should err on the side of safety, be prepared for rapidly-changing weather and/or water conditions EVERY DAY and always wear life jackets onboard. More information on boating safety can be found at the National Safe Boating Council's web site.

Waterspouts are common occurrences over all of South Florida's large bodies of water year-round, although they're more frequent during the warm and humid summer months. Therefore, you must prepare and stay aware of weather threats in order to remain safe while enjoying a day out on the boat. NOAA Weather Radio is an excellent source of continuous weather information, including warnings and advisories for rapidly changing and dangerous weather conditions. Check the National Weather Service marine forecasts before heading out. Visit the NWS Marine/Safe Boating web site for more details.