

# OP NOTICE TO SHIPPING N-11-2026



Operation of Commercial  
and Non-Commercial  
Small Craft in Panama  
Canal Waters



January 1, 2026

## **OP NOTICE TO SHIPPING N-11-2026**

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To: Shipping Agents, Owners and Operators

Subject: Operation of Commercial and Non-Commercial Small  
Craft in Panama Canal Waters

### **1. Effective Date and Cancellation**

a. This Notice is effective on the date of issue and cancels OP Notice to Shipping N-11-2025. A revised Notice will be issued in January of each year or when otherwise required.

### **2. Purpose and Scope**

a. The Regulation on Navigation in Panama Canal Waters establishes the legal framework that regulates the navigation of small craft that do not transit and empowers the Panama Canal Authority, through the Vice Presidency for Operations, to issue the requirements to enforce this regulation.

b. This same Regulation on Navigation establishes the rules to apply to all small craft that are not transiting.

c. Through this Notice to Shipping, the Panama Canal Authority (ACP) establishes the requirements and rules that must be followed to operate small craft of up to 20 meters (65 feet) in length for commercial or non-commercial activities in Panama Canal waters. These requirements and rules help to improve the navigation in Canal waters, reduce the risk of accidents, and contribute to the safe navigation of other vessels transiting the Canal. The areas to be dedicated to these commercial and non-commercial activities are described in this document.

### **3. Reminder on applicable rules and regulations in Canal Waters**

a. The Panama Canal Authority (ACP) reminds all operators and owners of small craft, marinas and yacht clubs of the rules and regulations applicable to small craft every time they enter and navigate within Panama Canal waters. It has been reported that some of these small craft are either not equipped with VHF radios or are failing to monitor Channel 12 and 16, as required, and possibly disregarding instructions given by Panama Canal Port Entry Coordinators at the Flamenco and Cristobal Signal Stations.

The Regulation on Navigation in Panama Canal Waters identifies as an offense the “Failure to comply with the regulations, orders, or instructions issued by the Authority in relation to maritime operations in Canal areas.” The same regulation identifies as an offense, the “Failure to comply with Authority rules or instructions on the transit of and provisions on small crafts, including vessels for recreational or other purposes, and on the use of any devices, equipment, or gear which may imply a risk to navigation in Canal waters.”

Be advised that these offenses are subject to possible sanctions. This above-cited regulation states that: “When the administrative offense may be considered a criminal offense, the case shall be referred to the competent authorities,” and states: “The following sanctions shall be imposed for offenses, according to their seriousness:

- (1) Non-serious offenses: fines of one hundred Balboas to ten thousand Balboas (B/.100.00 to B/.10,000.00).
- (2) Serious offenses: fines of ten thousand and one Balboas to one hundred thousand Balboas (B/.10,000.00 to B/.100,000.00).
- (3) Very serious offenses: fines of one hundred thousand and one Balboas to one million Balboas (B/.100,001.00 to B/.1,000,000.00).”

b. Panama Canal regulations also indicate that: “small craft shall not be operated in the proximity of or cross in front of transiting vessels. Additionally, small craft shall not navigate at a speed or produce a wake that would endanger their safety, as well as the safety, lives and property of others in the area, including the Panama Canal Authority. Failure to adhere to this or any other regulation will be punishable with the immediate revocation of the certificate issued to the operator and/or the operation permit issued to the small craft and the applicable sanctions will be imposed.”

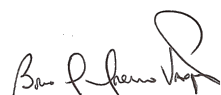
Therefore, it is imperative for yacht clubs and marinas located in or next to Canal waters to notify their members, as well as for yacht owners and operators, to be aware of these rules and regulations, and the implications for lack of compliance.

Additionally, the navigational and adjacent waters of the Panama Canal were designed and delineated to guarantee the safe transit of vessels through the waterway. The efficiency of transit operations requires transiting vessels, as well as Panama Canal Authority floating equipment, to comply with strict schedules and to navigate under coordination with the Integrated Operations Control Center (CICO). These vessels may create swells or wakes that may directly or indirectly affect small craft or physical installations located on the shores of the Canal.

The concessionaire that chooses to operate in Canal waters or have installations on Canal shores must be aware and anticipate these risks. Additionally, they must be aware that Canal operations shall not be affected to accommodate other activities not directly related to the transiting of vessels.

Installations located within Canal waters or on Canal shores, including recreational activities (marinas, clubs and boat ramps), of commercial type or public interest, must not, in any way, interfere with Canal operations. Therefore, all owners and operators of installations located within Canal waters or on Canal shores must incorporate into their structural designs the proper protection against the effects of swells or wakes that may be created by transiting vessels or ACP floating equipment. By reason of the type of operations performed by the Panama Canal Authority in Canal waters, the ACP will not assume any responsibility for damages to these installations or properties of third parties.

Anyone operating any vessel in Canal waters, particularly small craft without an ACP pilot or ACP transit advisor on board, is hereby reminded of their obligation to comply with ACP maritime regulations, as well as with Advisories and Notices to Shipping. Failure to comply will result in sanctions that may include prohibition for the craft to operate in Canal waters.



Boris Moreno Vásquez  
Vice President for Operations

# OPERATION OF COMMERCIAL AND NON-COMMERCIAL SMALL CRAFT IN PANAMA CANAL WATERS

## 1. Definitions

The words, expressions and abbreviations used in this Notice shall have the following meaning and scope:

- a. *Small craft*: All vessels up to 20 meters (65 feet) in length used for commercial or non-commercial activities and are not transiting the Canal.
- b. *Commercial use*: When a small craft is used as part of the tourism industry or any other maritime activity with the intent of making a profit.
- c. *Non-Commercial use*: When a small craft is used in recreational non-profit maritime activities.
- d. *Permit*: Authorization issued by the Transit Operations Division of the Panama Canal Authority to conduct commercial or non-commercial activities in Canal waters or other specifically designated areas.
- e. *Certificate*: Identification issued by the Board of Inspectors of the Panama Canal Authority authorizing the individual operator of commercial or non-commercial small craft to operate this vessel in Canal waters.
- f. *Tender*: Small Auxiliary Craft owned and operated by a passenger vessel, which is used for the transportation of their passengers to land and vice versa.
- g. *Contract*: Agreement between the Panama Canal Authority and a third party to conduct commercial activities in Canal waters.

## 2. Requirements for the Certification of Small Craft Operators Carrying Out Non-Commercial Activities

The following will be required to obtain a Small Craft Operator Certificate to operate a small craft of up to 20 meters (65 feet) in length to carry out non-commercial activities:

- a. The applicant must be 18 years or older.

- b. The certificate is renewable every five years in accordance with the requirements established for that purpose by the Board of Inspectors.
- c. A copy of this Notice to Shipping, as well as a copy of the Small Craft Operator's Manual and Navigational Charts of the Canal, must be always acquired and maintained on board.
- d. The applicant must pass a written exam administered by the Board of Inspectors of the Panama Canal Authority.
- e. The applicant must sign a document releasing the Panama Canal Authority from any responsibility for damages that may occur because of carrying out non-commercial activities in Canal waters. The candidate shall follow all regulations and limitations established for such activities, as well as for navigation in Canal waters.

### **3. Requirements for Commercial Small Craft**

To obtain operation permits for small craft of up to 20 meters (65 feet) in length to be used for commercial activities, the following will be required:

- a. All small craft shall be registered on a yearly basis with the Panama Canal Authority by the office of Maritime Safety of the Board of Inspectors of the Panama Canal Authority.
- b. All small craft shall visibly display the sticker showing the vessel identification number, which will be provided at the time of registration by the Panama Canal Authority.
- c. All small craft to be used for commercial activities shall provide proof to the Panama Canal Authority of an insurance policy covering liability to third parties.
- d. All small craft must carry safety and communication equipment as required by Panama Canal Regulations.
- e. All small craft must secure prior authorization of the proposed routes by the Transit Operations Division Manager.

### **4. Requirements for the Certification of Small Commercial Craft Operators**

To issue Small Craft Operator Certificates for the operation of crafts up to 20 meters (65 feet) in length to be used for commercial activities, the same requirements

established for non-commercial small craft operators shall be complied with, in addition to the following requirements:

1. The applicant must provide the following, which shall be issued by a competent organization properly recognized by the Panama Canal Authority:

- a. Valid Maritime License issued by the Panama Maritime Authority (AMP) for the applicable small craft to be operated;
- b. Certification of his/her swimming ability;
- c. Results of a recent complete eye exam, including color perception, visual accuracy and depth perception;
- d. Results of a recent hearing exam; and
- e. First Aid and CPR certification.

2. The applicant must pass a written exam administered by the Board of Inspectors of the Panama Canal Authority for the type of commercial activity to be carried out.

3. The applicant must pass a training course administered by the Maritime Simulation, Research and Development Center of the Panama Canal Authority (SIDMAR).

4. The applicant must pass a practical exam administered by the Maritime Simulation, Research and Development Center of the Panama Canal Authority (SIDMAR) to demonstrate that he/she can safely operate the assigned craft. The requirements of this practical exam will depend on the type of craft and the nature of the commercial activities to be carried out.

5. The Small Craft Operator Certificate will be issued with the same expiration date as the valid maritime license of the applicant issued by the competent organization.

6. The applicant must acquire a copy of this Notice to Shipping, as well as a copy of the Small Craft Operator's Manual and the Navigational Charts of the Panama Canal.

7. The applicant must sign a document releasing the Panama Canal Authority of any responsibility for damages that may occur because of such commercial activities in the designated areas of the Canal. The applicant shall also comply with all regulations and limitations established for commercial activities in Canal waters. Likewise, the legal representatives of companies and/or organizations interested in commercial maritime activities in Canal waters shall sign the aforementioned document.

## **5. Requirements for Small Auxiliary Craft (Tenders) Carrying Passengers**

To be issued an operating permit to conduct maritime activities involving small auxiliary craft (tenders) in specifically authorized areas of the Panama Canal, an application shall be submitted to the Transit Operations Division Manager for approval prior to arrival in Panama Canal waters. The following will be required:

- a. Prior approval of the proposed commercial activity by the Transit Operations Division Manager. This information shall include the proposed routes.
- b. A list of the operators that will be involved in this activity, along with copies of their training qualifications and certificates of competency must be presented to the Transit Operations Division Manager.
- c. A list of the amount and type of small auxiliary craft (tenders) that will be utilized for this activity, as well as copies of their valid certificates of inspection, must be delivered to Transit Operations Division Manager prior to arrival.
- d. The legal representative of the company or interested organization must sign a document releasing the Panama Canal Authority of all responsibility for damages or injuries that could possibly result from the proposed commercial activity. In addition, the company or interested organization shall comply with ACP regulations and requirements to obtain approval for the commercial activity in Gatun Lake.

Operation permits for commercial activities will be issued on a temporary basis with an expiration date for each individual request. A copy of the operation permit must be posted on each craft and shall be available upon request by the competent authority. It is the responsibility of the applicant on record to maintain the permits up to date.

The Panama Canal Authority will deliver the operation permits to the master of the passenger vessel, together with a copy of the regulations and small craft operator's manual. It is the responsibility of the master to ensure that this information is disseminated to those operators on his vessel that will be participating in this commercial activity, and he/she will be responsible for ensuring that they will abide by these regulations.

A Tender Inspector will be assigned to maritime activities involving the tenders of passenger vessels to verify compliance with the requirements listed in this Notice, as communications liaison with the ACP, as well as to coordinate the tender operations.



## 6. Restrictions and Sanctions

The following restrictions and sanctions will apply to all small crafts of up to 20 meters (65 feet) in length when navigating in Canal waters:

a. All small craft are prohibited from navigating in Gaillard Cut (Culebra Cut), Miraflores Lake, the approaches to the locks, and the Canal's fairway. However, it is permissible to cross the Canal's fairway or navigation channel with prior approval from the Transit Operations Division Manager.

b. The practice of aquatic sports in the operational areas of the Canal, to include the anchorage areas, is prohibited, except for the areas specifically designated for that purpose.

c. The operation of all small craft while under the influence of alcohol or any other drug or substance that would alter or impair the normal behavior of the operator of the small craft is prohibited.

d. Small craft shall not be operated near or cross in front of transiting vessels. Small craft shall not navigate at a speed or produce a wake that would endanger their safety, as well as the safety, lives and property of others in the area, including the Panama Canal Authority. Failure to adhere to this or any other regulation will be punishable with the immediate revocation of the Small Craft Operator Certificate issued to the operator and/or the operation permit issued to the small craft. In addition, applicable sanctions will be imposed.

e. The Panama Canal Authority, in coordination with the competent governmental authorities, will establish security patrols, enforce regulations, and guard the Canal area to impede illegal activities in Canal waters.

f. The Administrator of the Panama Canal Authority, or his designee, will impose the corresponding sanctions for any violations to these regulations, in accordance with the established procedures in the Regulation on Navigation in Panama Canal Waters.

## 7. Communications

Direct communication with the Vice Presidency for Operations concerning this Notice to Shipping may be made at the following telephone numbers:

Vice Presidency for Operations	272-4500
Transit Operations Division	272-4218
Board of Inspectors	272-3403
Maritime Simulation, Research and Development Center	272-8550
Integrated Operations Control Center	272-4201

Or to the following mail address:

**GCC-ACP**  
(Name, Position and Title)  
1966 NW 82 Ave.  
Miami FL 33126-1049, USA