



UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

FINDINGS OF CONCERN

First Coast Guard District

December 8, 2025
Boston, MA

Findings of Concern 018-25

THE MASTER'S ULTIMATE RETENTION OF AUTHORITY

Purpose. The U.S. Coast Guard issues findings of concern to disseminate information related to unsafe conditions that were identified as causal factors in a casualty and could contribute to future incidents. Findings of concern are intended to educate the public, state, or local agencies about the conditions discovered so they may address the findings with an appropriate voluntary action or highlight existing applicable company policies or state/local regulations.

The Incident. In July 2023, a JEEP Wrangler, used by longshoremen as a “pusher vehicle” to load non-running cargo vehicles onto a foreign flagged Ro-Ro/Container vessel moored at Port Newark, New Jersey, caught fire while inside one of the vessel’s vehicle decks. Firefighting efforts by the vessel’s crew and land-based firefighters were ineffective at suppressing the fire. Tragically, during the response, two land-based firefighters lost their lives, and several others were injured.

Contributing Factors and Analysis. The investigation identified that the responding local land-based fire department lacked sufficient training on the roles and responsibilities of the vessel’s crewmembers. Therefore, it was not clear to the responders that the Master¹ retained ultimate authority over all actions taking place on the vessel, including those conducted by land-based firefighters. Additionally, due to a perceived language barrier, the responding fire department failed to integrate vessel crewmembers into their planning process and interaction with the Master remained very limited. Had the firefighters been trained in the vessel crew roles and responsibilities, they would have understood the value each crewmember, and most critically the Master, could have provided to their efforts and in developing an Incident Action Plan.

Findings of Concern. Coast Guard investigators identified the following measures land-based fire departments can take to mitigate the risks associated with responding to commercial vessel fires:

- Train members to understand the basic roles and responsibilities of key vessel officers (i.e., Master, Chief Mate², Chief Engineer³). This should include routine vessel familiarity visits for at least the fire department or company with the responsibility for arriving first on scene to each port area.
- During emergency responses, leverage the knowledge and experience of the Master in decision-making regarding the status of the vessel, shipboard fire suppression efforts and equipment, and the accountability of those onboard. Local firefighters should receive a

¹ The Captain of a merchant ship (NFPA 1405, Section 3.3.61); senior most officer onboard.

² The deck officer immediately responsible to the vessel’s master (NFPA 1405, Section 3.3.62.1).

³ The senior most engineering officer directly responsible to the vessel’s master.



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brief from the Master prior to commencing any response operations to ensure timely and meaningful engagement with the vessel's crew and better understanding of the vessel's condition in accordance with the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1405 – Guide for Land-Based Fire Departments That Respond to Marine Vessel Fires, section 5.4.1.2:

“Liaison with the ship's captain is to be established as a priority item at the outset of any incident. Courtesy and cooperation with the captain greatly enhance any operations aboard the ship. The captain will provide information on the sequence of events and the actions taken prior to the fire department's arrival. The captain should also know which systems aboard the ship are available and can be used.”

- If cargo operations or maintenance were being conducted at the time of fire, accountability must be obtained for both vessel crew and longshoremen or maintenance personnel who were onboard.
- As soon as possible, incorporate the Master, a senior vessel officer, and/or shoreside vessel representative (Port Captain/Engineer, Qualified Individual) into the fire department's Incident Command or a Joint/Unified Command (if established) structure. This request should be made during the first interaction with the Master.
- As soon as possible, request Coast Guard and/or Port Authority assistance and ensure these entities are embedded in the fire department's or Joint/Unified Command's (if established) Incident Command Post. These individuals have specific maritime knowledge that can help land-based firefighters navigate the nuances of vessel crew interactions, equipment, documentation, and the shipboard environment.

*Note: These measures are not intended to usurp the direction of the land-based fire department's Incident Commander over their personnel's operations, but rather to ensure those operations account for the unique shipboard environment and challenges. While most land-based fire departments have a strong desire and implied duty to act, in some shipboard circumstances, the best action may be no action at all. For instance, if an installed system is discharged on the vessel, no immediate action to disturb the fire zone ensures effectiveness of the suppressing agent.

Closing. These findings of concern are provided for informational purpose only and do not relieve any domestic or international safety, operational, or material requirements. For any questions or comments please contact the First Coast Guard District, Inspections and Investigations Branch, by email at D01-DG-D1-CCPrevention@uscg.mil.