



Media Update

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The ABP Interpretation

By John Henry, Technical Team Leader National Marine Safety Committee

The National Marine Safety Committee (NMSC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the articles about the Australian Builders Plate (ABP) in the January edition of Boating Business and the December edition of Go Boating.

The ABP is a national safe boating initiative supported by Australia's marine agencies that is being introduced around the country either through legislation or as a registration requirement. The information on the ABP was determined by analysing the principal risk factors involved with boating incidents and fatalities, notably overloading, capsizing and sinking.

It's sobering to think that 40 people died in recreational boating incidents in Australia in 2007 alone. Clearly, operator error plays a large part in many accidents; however, the safety of the design of some boats is also a factor.

The ABP helps skippers plan their trip by providing details on the maximum power outboard that can be safely used, the maximum number of people that can be carried on board, the total safe maximum load, and buoyancy performance for boats less than 6 metres.

The ABP standard also recognises that Australian manufacturers make boats for export to North America and Europe and that boats complying with the legal requirements of those regions are imported into Australia. Therefore, the standard allows for the information on the plate to be determined in accordance with any one of a range of standards, including the Australian Standard, the standards used in the USA or Europe, or other relevant national or international technical standards. The goal is to ensure that all boats achieve a common set of safety outcomes, without restricting trade by requiring boats that already meet the more onerous overseas legal requirements to be retested.

In 2007, several boat manufacturers in Western Australia approached the local NMSC member, the Department of Planning and Infrastructure (DPI), seeking some guidance on the single integral air tank issue as they had heard that there was a way to avoid fitting flotation material if you claimed compliance with ISO 12217-3 on the ABP. At no time was it suggested that these Australian made boats were intended for export to Europe or would meet the European Directive. As the ABP is a national standard, DPI sought the advice of the full NMSC on the matter.

This was not a simple question because aluminium boats that rely solely on just one integral air compartment for their buoyancy were known to be particularly at risk of sinking if they couldn't get back to shore in an emergency. A tragic example was the case of the *Malu Sara* which sank in the Torres Strait in 2005, resulting in the loss of five lives. An inquiry found that the most likely reason the boat failed to stay afloat was because of leaks

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in the single integral air chamber that the boat relied upon for buoyancy. Four other boats of the same design were tested and found to have leaks in the air compartments.

Any type of buoyancy has to take account of the risk of being compromised to ensure it will do the job in an emergency. Foam buoyancy needs to be protected against attack by fuels and this is addressed in each of the technical standards recognised by the ABP standard. For air chambers, the risk is that a slow leak will allow water into the chamber without you realising until it's too late. The Australian, American and other comparable technical standards address that risk by opening up the two largest chambers during testing of the buoyancy performance of boats relying on air chamber buoyancy.

The European situation is a little more complicated. ISO 12217-3 is one of some twenty or so standards that must be met under the European Recreation Craft Directive; and because it covers all types of sailing and power boats, the standard has to provide for a range of circumstances. In one very specific case ISO 12217-3 allows the buoyancy performance to be tested without any of the air chambers being left open. That is where the air tanks of every single boat produced have been individually pressure tested and then re-tested to an enhanced pressure test to ensure there are no leaks. However, the ABP doesn't require pressure testing, nor does it specify hull scantlings like in Europe, leaving a question mark about that approach to testing when it's used outside of the Recreational Craft Directive.

After considering all the facts, the NMSC issued a technical interpretation of the ABP that includes the determination that all boats relying on air chambers for buoyancy should be tested with the two largest air chambers opened up, regardless of which technical standard was being used for ABP purposes. In other words, a single air chamber is not deemed adequate.

This interpretation was communicated to Australian marine agencies, the Australian Maritime Industries Federation and through NMSC's Safety Lines newsletter. A media release was also sent to boating and industry publications.

The ABP standard sets a level playing field for safety by making positive flotation a given, in the same way that the Australian Design Rules set a level playing field for safety features in cars, like airbags. The flexibility in the ABP standard is intended to foster trade, not to encourage 'shopping around' for testing standards. Far from moving the goal posts, by issuing the interpretation, the NMSC has simply reinforced these principles.

When members of the public buy a boat and take their family out in it, they should be able to rely unreservedly on the information on the ABP, without having to worry about which technical standard was used to determine it.

The NMSC aims to achieve nationally uniform marine safety practices and is made up of the CEOs of Australia's marine safety agencies. For further details, refer to the Guidance Circular titled *Technical Interpretation of Buoyancy Performance of Recreational Boats in Relation to the ABP Standard* on www.nmsc.gov.au

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Media only - For further information, please contact NMSC communications Ursula Bishop on 0412 813 056.