

Toilet waste – hold on to it!

Ban on discharge of toilet waste from recreational boats in 2009

The Netherlands is a wonderful country for water sports; plenty of water where you can enjoy the wide open spaces, silence and beautiful countryside. To participate safely in water sports, you need unpolluted surface waters – especially if you want to experience the delights of taking a refreshing dip on a hot, summer's day.

Although surface waters have become much cleaner over the last few decades, there is still a great deal to do if our recreational waters are to remain in use in the future. Large-scale untreated industrial and urban discharges may be a thing of the past, but we must now put a stop to the many small discharges as well. You, as water sports enthusiast, can help to improve water quality. You could, for example, stop discharging your toilet wastes. Ultimately it is in your own interests, because we are talking here about the water you sail and swim in.

Why a ban on discharge?

Every year, tens of thousands of people become ill in the Netherlands after swimming in bacteria-infected water. Stomach upsets are the main problem, but chest and ear infections are also common. Children are particularly vulnerable because they take in relatively large volumes of water.

Such health problems are often caused by the 150,000 recreational boats that have toilets on board. Most of these boats still discharge toilet waste directly into the water, so it is not surprising to learn that the bacterial quality of the water at moorings and anchorages worsens as the number of boats increase. Measurements made according to the new EU Bathing Water Guideline showed that Dutch waters were well below standard. The Government will have to ensure that the Netherlands complies with European legislation, but the fact that toilet waste is just plain dirty and can cause other water sports enthusiasts to become ill is still the most important consideration.

Legislation

The Bathing Water Directive is not the only legislation which obliges the Dutch Government to ensure clean water; there is also the European Water Framework Directive. This will put an end to low-volume sewage discharges in the next few years. The reason why vessels are still able to discharge their waste is that there was no system for collecting it in the past. Over the last few years, more than 300 wastewater pump-out stations have been installed especially for recreational craft. These are conveniently spread out over all the Dutch water recreation areas, and the numbers are continuing to grow. In 2009, when the discharge ban comes into force, marinas with more than 50 cabin cruisers will also be obliged by law to provide pump-out stations. Waste collection systems for other sorts of boats, such as charter vessels, are also being developed so that a discharge ban can be implemented for this sector as well.

In other words, we are talking here about the health of swimmers and surfers, about sustainable water quality and about the obligations to comply with European legislation. Now that there are enough pump-out stations and the pleasure boat owners have had sufficient time to convert their vessels, the governments and all the environmental and water sport organisations will be supporting the ban on discharge toilet waste as from 1 January 2009.

For all recreational vessels

The waste discharge ban will apply to all new and existing Dutch and foreign recreational vessels that have on-board toilets, as defined in the Recreational Craft Directive. Only special groups, such as historical vessels, are exempted from the ban.

Alternative on-board toilets

The alternative to pumping toilet wastewater overboard is to make use of an on-board holding tank. The stored waste can then be disposed of at a pump-out station in a marina. Please note that installing such a holding tank is not compulsory; it is just that you are no longer permitted to discharge waste into the water. Of course, you could make use of the toilet facilities onshore or have another sort of toilet on board, such as a vacuum or portable (chemical) toilet. Your choice will ultimately depend on the available space on board, how often the stored toilet waste has to be disposed of, the required convenience and the costs. For example, wastewater-holding tanks for electrical or mechanical flushing take up more room than vacuum or portable toilets. A toilet is also quite a bit cheaper than a holding tank. It is therefore very important to make a careful choice.

Disposing of wastewater

You can use one of the 300 pump-out stations for domestic waste water (mostly in the larger marinas) to empty your holding tank. The numbers of shore pump-out facilities will certainly further increase over the next few years. Also, disposal of toilet waste is free if you moor at the marina for the night. It is possible to empty a portable (chemical) toilet in almost every marina that is connected up to the sewage system.

No ban on discharge of grey water

Grey water from kitchen sinks, washbasins and showers can still be discharged because it is less polluting than toilet waste and, in addition, is not responsible for bacterial infections. It is also technically more difficult to store household wastewater on board existing vessels; a far larger holding tank is necessary. Of course, you should still be conscious of how you dispose of wastewater containing soaps and detergents, as many water organisms are sensitive to these chemicals. It is much easier to build in a wastewater-holding tank when constructing a new leisure craft. Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that, in future, a discharge ban for grey water will apply to new boats.

What can you do?

Any boat owners who think their own polluting activities are minimal are mistaken. Just one toilet discharge in a large expanse of water will, of course, not influence the water quality to any great extent. However, in the Netherlands, more than 150,000 sailing and motor boats use an on-board toilet; all these small amounts can add up and have a large impact, especially on fine summer days at busy mooring points and anchorages. That nice cool dip in the water will be a lot less pleasant when you realise you are swimming in your neighbour's diluted sewage. It is filthy, it stinks and you can become ill as a result.

In fact, it should be normal for you, as water sports enthusiast, to collect and store your own waste. At home, you teach your children to wash their hands after going to the toilet and of course they do that on board as well. After which, if the sun is shining, they go for a nice swim

How can you, as boat owner, reduce the health risks? Well, you can: limit all your toilet discharges from now on, especially in water where people swim or surf a lot; make use of onshore toilet facilities; or store your toilet waste in a holding tank or portable (chemical) toilet and empty this at the special disposal points in marinas. You are then ahead of the discharge ban that will come into force in 2009 for all pleasure craft.