



# Marine Safety Information Bulletin

U.S. Coast Guard  
Sector Upper Mississippi River  
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## Low Water Advisory – Sector Upper Mississippi River and Illinois River

The Captain of the Port (COTP) Upper Mississippi River is issuing this Low Water Advisory for all waters of the Upper Mississippi River (UMR) and Illinois River (ILR). This advisory is intended to alert mariners and port stakeholders to the potential for developing low-water conditions that may impact vessel operations, fleeting areas, and navigation channel depths in the coming weeks. While current stages remain within normal operating ranges, forecasted trends and historical patterns indicate the possibility of declining water levels. Mariners are strongly encouraged to take proactive safety measures to prevent groundings, allisions, and other marine casualties.

**Recommended Precautions:** During periods of declining water levels or when the Waterways Action Plan (WAP) – Low Water Watch Phase is implemented, mariners are advised to:

- Monitor daily river gauge readings and forecast trends for the UMR and ILR.
- Evaluate tow configurations and draft early to anticipate restricted channel widths or shoaling.
- Coordinate with fleeting areas, terminals, and the Western Rivers Command Center before movement to verify adequate depth and clearance.
- Avoid overloading barges or operating with drafts that reduce under-keel clearance.
- Conduct navigational assessments in accordance with 46 CFR § 140.635 and maintain situational awareness near bridge piers, structures, and known crossings.

**Hazardous Condition Reporting:** In accordance with 33 CFR §§ 160.203, 160.216, owners, agents, masters, operators, and persons in charge of U.S. vessels in commercial service must immediately notify the Coast Guard of any hazardous condition either aboard the vessel or caused by its operation. A “hazardous condition,” as defined in 33 CFR § 160.202, includes any circumstance that may adversely affect the safety of a vessel, structure, or the environment—such as overloading, grounding, or restricted maneuverability due to low water. Failure to report a hazardous condition may result in enforcement action under federal law and does not relieve a mariner or company of their duty to act safely and responsibly.

**Mariner Responsibilities:** Sector Upper Mississippi River reminds all owners, operators, and credentialed mariners to review 33 CFR part 164, subpart B (Navigation Safety Regulations), and 46 CFR part 15 (Manning Requirements for Vessels). Mariners are responsible for understanding the factors affecting towing vessel maneuverability, draft, and the responsibilities of operators. Officers in charge of the watch must conduct navigational assessments under 46 CFR § 140.635, maintaining situational awareness through proactive voyage planning, risk mitigation, and diligent navigation with due regard for forecasted river stages.

**COTP Authority and Enforcement:** If river levels continue to decline, and unsafe navigation conditions develop, the COTP may issue additional restrictions or orders under the Ports and Waterways Safety Act (46 U.S.C. §§ 70001–70036) and 33 CFR § 160.111 to control vessel operations, tow configurations, or movement as necessary to ensure safety and protect the marine environment. Violations of such restrictions or orders may subject vessel owners, operators, and persons in charge to civil penalties under 46 U.S.C. § 70036, operational controls, or orders to remain in place until compliance is verified. Additionally, vessel operators may be subject to suspension and revocation (S&R) proceedings against their Merchant Mariner Credential under 46 U.S.C. chapter 77, 46 CFR part 5, and 46 CFR § 10.235(a) for negligence, misconduct, involvement in a marine casualty or accident, or failure to comply with a COTP Order.

**Reporting and Contacts:** Mariners who identify missing or off-station ATON, hazardous conditions, or significant shoaling should contact the Western Rivers Command Center via VHF-FM Channel 16 or at 1-866-360-3386. For additional information, contact the Sector Upper Mississippi River Waterways Management Division at (314) 269-2500 or email [SUMRWaterways@uscg.mil](mailto:SUMRWaterways@uscg.mil).

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