

RISK SIMPLIFIED

RESOURCES

[California Code of Regulations:
Title 8 Section 3389](#)

[California Code of Regulations:
Title 8 Section 1602](#)

[USCG Boating -
Wearing Your Life Jacket](#)

QUESTIONS

[Email PRISM Risk Control](#)
or call 916.850.7300

Personal Flotation Devices

by Chandler Wright

California's expansive waterways, and its large coast line, pose a drowning hazard to employees that work on or near bodies of water. Depending on the hazards that are present, employees working near or on water may be required to wear or at least have accessible a personal flotation device (PFD), provided by their employer. All vessels in the state of California, including those used for work on the water, are required to have a PFD for each individual onboard.

When and Why

Personal flotation devices, such as life jackets, are useful pieces of equipment that provide a number of safeguards to help protect lives when an employee falls into the water. Primarily, PFDs provide buoyancy, helping to keep people afloat while also keeping their face pointing up towards the sky, allowing them to breathe. Additionally, PFDs are often found in bright, reflective colors to help improve visibility for the rescuers, while also providing extra warmth to the employee.

All agencies across California are responsible for conducting a hazard assessment to determine which of their employees should be issued a personal flotation device, based on the tasks they perform and their proximity to water while working. Once the need for the PFD has been determined, agencies must provide training on properly using the device, while also ensuring proper fit for each individual. One size or style may not fit all employees, so agencies should make available more than one type of PFD.

Any employee that is working around water with the potential to fall in should be equipped with a PFD, or at least provided one to be kept accessible, depending on the work. Some examples of workers that may need to be provided with a PFD include:

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- Officers patrolling lakes, rivers, or the ocean
- Park Rangers working near lakes, rivers, or waterfalls
- Public Works crews fixing or inspecting bridges, storm drains, or levees
- Construction workers building docks, piers, or other structures near water
- Emergency Responders helping during floods or with water rescues

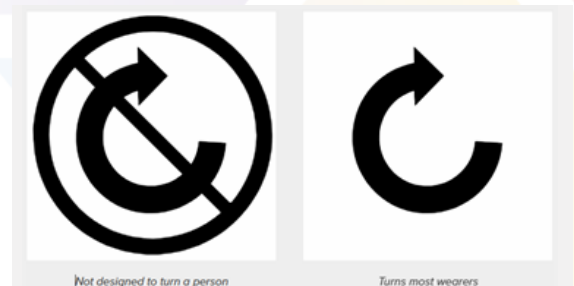
Types of PFDs and Labeling

All PFDs must be approved by the United States Coast Guard (USCG) and labeled through one of the two USCG's approved methods. These two methods include displaying either the type system (Type I, Type II, or Type III) or the performance levels (50, 70, 100, 150, 275). The performance level indicates the amount of buoyancy that is provided, measured in Newtons, meaning the higher the performance level, the higher the buoyancy. The different types of PFDs include:

Type System	
Type I - Offshore Life Jacket	Best for open water, rough conditions, remote locations, or when rescue may take time. It has the most buoyancy and can turn an unconscious person face-up.
Type II – Near-Shore Buoyant Vest	Good for calm, inland water, or where there is a good chance of a quick rescue. It is less bulky than Type I but may not turn an unconscious person face-up every time.
Type III – Flotation Aid	Great for calm water and when rescue is likely to be quick. They are comfortable to wear for long periods but are not designed to turn an unconscious person face-up.

Performance Levels	
Level 275	Intended primarily for offshore use under extreme conditions.
Level 150	Intended for general application or for use with foul weather clothing. It will turn an unconscious person into a safe position.
Level 100	Intended for those who may have to wait for rescue, but are likely to wait in sheltered water. Not suitable for rough water use.
Level 70	Intended for those with help or quick means of rescue. Not intended for long period of time in disturbed water
Level 50	Intended for competent swimmers near to the bank or shore, or who have a quick means of rescue.

USCG approved labels will also provide information on the proper use, inspection, and storage for each specific PFD. When considering which PFD to use, an important icon found on the label identifies whether or not an employee wearing the PFD will be rotated while in the water, as shown here:



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Agencies should choose the proper type of PFD based on the work being done and the water conditions, as well as response time for rescue. Always review the USCG approved label for all of the relevant information for the specific PFD.

Proper Fit

Wearing a PFD that fits correctly is just as important as having one available. If the PFD is either too big or too small, it may not allow the employee to float properly in the water. Each employee should have their own PFD or be assigned one that fits properly. When possible, the PFD should remain with the employee as they move from one assignment to another. Employees should never be allowed to wear an ill-fitting PFD.

PFDs must always be worn as intended by the manufacturer, ensuring everything is tightened, zipped, and/or buckled appropriately. When a PFD fits properly the chest portion of the device should not touch the chin when looking left, right, or over the shoulder. The shoulder straps should also not rise above the ears when the PFD is pulled up. Additionally, the PFD should feel snug, but not too tight. Proper fit of PFDs should always be tested before employees use them on the job.

Maintenance

As with any protective device, damage and deterioration will cause a PFD to no longer protect the employee as intended. It is important to always follow any maintenance schedule or service life recommendations made by the manufacturer. PFDs should be inspected regularly for rips, punctures, broken buckles, mold, and hardened or lumpy buoyancy material. PFDs that can be inflated should also be inspected regularly for air leaks. Any type of safety accessories, such as a water activated strobe light, should also be tested regularly to ensure they are functioning as intended. All warning and USCG labels must be attached and legible.

PFDs should always be stored in a dry, cool place, out of direct sunlight or heat sources in order to prolong service life and prevent damage or deterioration. In order to help prevent mold and mildew, it is best to thoroughly dry the device before placing it into storage. Any PFD that is found to show signs of damage or deterioration should be removed from service immediately and replaced.

PFDs are an essential life-saving tool when it comes to water related work activities. Agencies should evaluate any job task that is performed on or near water to determine whether or not a PFD is needed to ensure employee safety. For additional questions about personal flotation devices, please reach out to PRISM's [Risk Control](#) Department.

ADULT UNIVERSAL User Weight: >40 kg (>88 lbs) Chest Size: 76-132 cm (30-52 in.)	
	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Drowning hazard if not worn.• Must be fastened and properly adjusted to float the wearer. Choose and wear the device which fits you and your activity, visit www.wearlifeflajacket.org . Read and keep the owner's manual and tags for info such as rearming, wear, and care.	
Company Name Company Address Company website if available Made in XXXXX	Lab Certification Mark
USCG Approved 160.064/XXXXX TC Approved XXXXXX-X ANSI/CAN/UL 12402-5	
Model: XXXX Lot No. XXXX	Style: XXXX Certifying Lab Identification
Approval conditions state that this device must be worn to be counted as equipment required by vessels meeting Transport Canada or USCG regulations.	
Use: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fasten all closures and adjust for a snug fit. Inspection: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inspect your life vest before each outing. Do not use if your life vest shows signs of weathering, damage, or rot. Care and Storage: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dry thoroughly after each outing.• Store in a dry, cool place out of direct sunlight. 	

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