



# Dive Safe Strategy

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Cover image: Divers deploying the mandated Alpha flag with high viz addition at least 1 metre clear of the vessel's superstructure.

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## Introduction

The Maritime Management Centre (MMC) is responsible for the Boating Safety Education and Communication Strategy 2012-15 and works closely with Roads and Maritime Services (RMS), the operational delivery agency.

The focus of this strategy is to promote personal responsibility of boat skippers to watch out for divers and for divers to make themselves seen.

Diving related activities include spearfishing, SCUBA diving and snorkelling. Diving is a popular activity on NSW coastal waterways and being intermittently surface based, places participants at risk of being hit by a boat whilst on or near the surface. Spearfishers or “spearos” and snorkelers, are at particular risk as they spend most of their time on the surface. Spearfishers can also venture far from their boats or from the shore into areas where boat operators might not expect to encounter them. Whilst SCUBA divers are at somewhat less risk as they spend less time on the surface, they can be exposed if forced to surface suddenly, if they surface far from their boat or if they surface swim to a dive site from the shore.

## Background

The MMC, in conjunction with RMS, analysed the responses received in late 2011 to a discussion paper on dive flags. These informed changes to the *Marine Safety (General) Regulation 2009* on 30 November 2012 and are now law.

The legislation states that:

*The owner and operator of a vessel engaged in diving operations, and any diver engaged in those operations from the vessel, must ensure that a rigid replica of an International Code flag “A” is displayed on the vessel, or on a buoy or float positioned nearby, so as to make it clearly visible and that:*

- (a) the top of the flag is at least 1 metre from the top of any part of the vessel’s superstructure or other obstruction or at least 2 metres from the water surface if mounted on a nearby buoy, and*
- (b) the flag is visible through 360°, and*
- (c) the flag is at least 400 millimetres by 400 millimetres in size, and*
- (d) the flag is not faded, and*
- (e) the flag is maintained in good condition.*

Picture above: Dive boat showing mandated Alpha which must be at least 400x400mm in size and the recommended high viz flag.

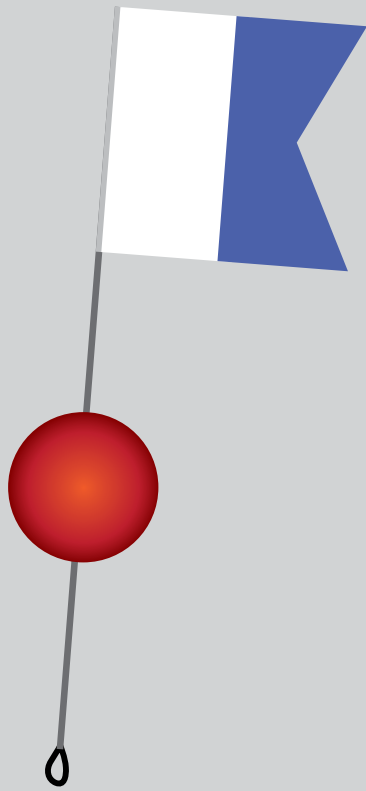


Figure 1a. Recommended float flag configuration from shore.

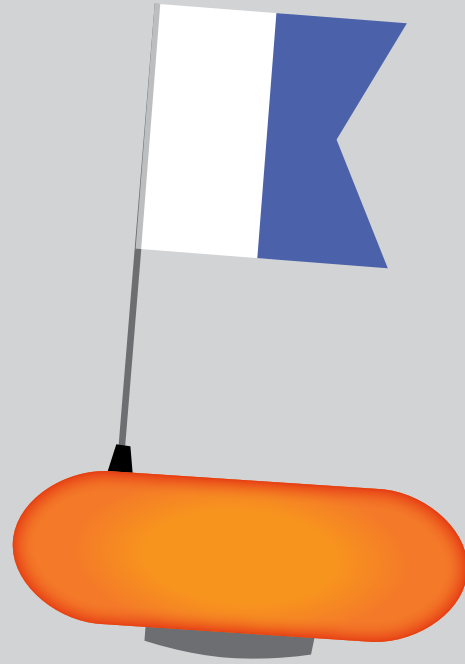


Figure 1b. Recommended personal float flag configuration.

There are no campaigns or publications specifically directed at diving activities and there are no regulations in place governing the use of floats and flags by divers who operate from a shoreline. While RMS Boating Safety Officers (BSOs) educate boat users on the water, the focus is mostly on general boating safety campaigns.

Shore-based SCUBA divers often deploy a large float and flag (see Figure 1a), particularly where there is high boat traffic. In spearfishing competitions competitors tow a small brightly coloured float and Alpha flag (see Figure 1b) and it is common place outside of competitions. Snorkelers rarely tow a float or flag.





## Statistics and trend analysis

Over the 10 year period 2002-03 to 2011-12, there have been 10 incidents involving divers or snorkelers being hit by a vessel and/or its propellers in NSW waters. 70% of these incidents resulted in serious injury. This is a much higher proportion than vessel incidents generally (13 per cent). Of the 10 incidents, there were only two in which it is believed that a float and/or flag was being used by the victim. The majority of incidents involved a collision between a diver and a vessel travelling through an area, and 70 per cent of the incidents were attributed to the skipper not keeping a proper lookout.

### Objective

This strategy aims to help eliminate incidents where people diving are injured by boats. This is to be achieved by promoting:

- **personal responsibility of boat skippers and divers** to understand the meaning of the International Code flag A (commonly known as the Alpha flag) which signals that divers are under the water and that boats need to keep clear at least 60 metres clear when travelling at speeds of 10 knots or more;
- **divers making themselves seen** by flying the Alpha flag from their boat or by towing a personal float and flag combination; and
- the **use of a fluoro yellow/green coloured flag** underneath the Alpha flag to draw the attention of passing boat traffic that there are divers in the water.

### Target audience

There key target audience groups for this strategy are:

- The NSW boating community, particularly skippers of recreational boats;
- Spearfishers, SCUBA divers and snorkelers; and
- The wider community of waterways users in NSW.

Primary audiences:

1. Boat owners/ skippers.
2. SCUBA divers, snorkelers and spearfishers

Secondary audiences:

1. Related water safety organisations
2. General public who may dive/ snorkel on a casual basis
3. Marine Studies students

Picture above: Diver correctly displaying the Alpha flag.



Figure 2a. The mandated 2m float flag combination with recommended high viz addition; Alpha must be a minimum of 400x400mm.



Figure 2b. The recommended personal float flag combination with high viz addition.

## Diver in the Water safety videos

Three YouTube videos will be released with a small run of DVDs to be sent to diving clubs and associations. The videos will have the following key target audiences:

1. Recreational boat drivers;
2. Spearfishers;
3. SCUBA divers; and
4. Marine Studies students

The safety messages under this strategy focus on personal responsibility when it comes to safety. Specifically:

### For the skipper responsibility focuses on:

- knowing what the Alpha flag and flag/float combination looks like and means, and being aware of areas where divers are likely to be in the water;
- correctly displaying the Alpha flag whenever divers are operating from a vessel;
- attaching a high viz fluoro yellow/green flag to draw attention to the Alpha flag (see Figures 2a and 2b);
- keeping a proper lookout and slowing down to less than 10 knots when within 60m of anyone in the water. The skipper needs to be especially careful when picking up divers;

- driving the boat according to prevailing conditions and visibility. Slowing down in glare, haze, low light, choppy water etc. so that they floats and flags are seen in time to avoid a dangerous interaction; and
- passing on the seaward side of a vessel or float showing Alpha flag.

### For the diver personal responsibility focuses on:

- correctly display the Alpha flag when operating from a vessel and also recommended when diving from shore;
- attaching a high viz fluoro yellow/green flag to draw attention to the Alpha flag whether the flag is displayed from a vessel, on a buoy or as a personal float and flag combination; and
- planning dives well by knowing the dive area including entry and exit points, keeping in close proximity to your vessel or flag and asking locals for advice about conditions including the likelihood of boats in the area.



## Other communication tools

The following tools are to be considered to communicate the Diver in the Water strategy.

- Safety video launch event
- Social Media: Maritime YouTube and Facebook
- Media release: at the start of dive season or prior to major spearfishing events
- Advertising options: extension of the Take Care be Prop Aware campaign or separate flyer to be sent out with boat licence renewals. A sticker to target school age students. Investigate if Maritime transaction tickets at RMS offices could have diver safety message on them
- Increased awareness of the diver in the water flag: addition of alpha flag to boating maps and improved signage at boat ramps that allow access to major dive sites
- Provide BSOs and BEOs with Alpha flags that can be distributed to spearfishing and diving associations
- Boating Handbook/Boating Safety Course and Quiz online: review and amend to include greater content on diver safety
- Boating maps to carry key messages and activity location advice.

Picture above: Spearos preparing to enter the water with personal float flag combinations.





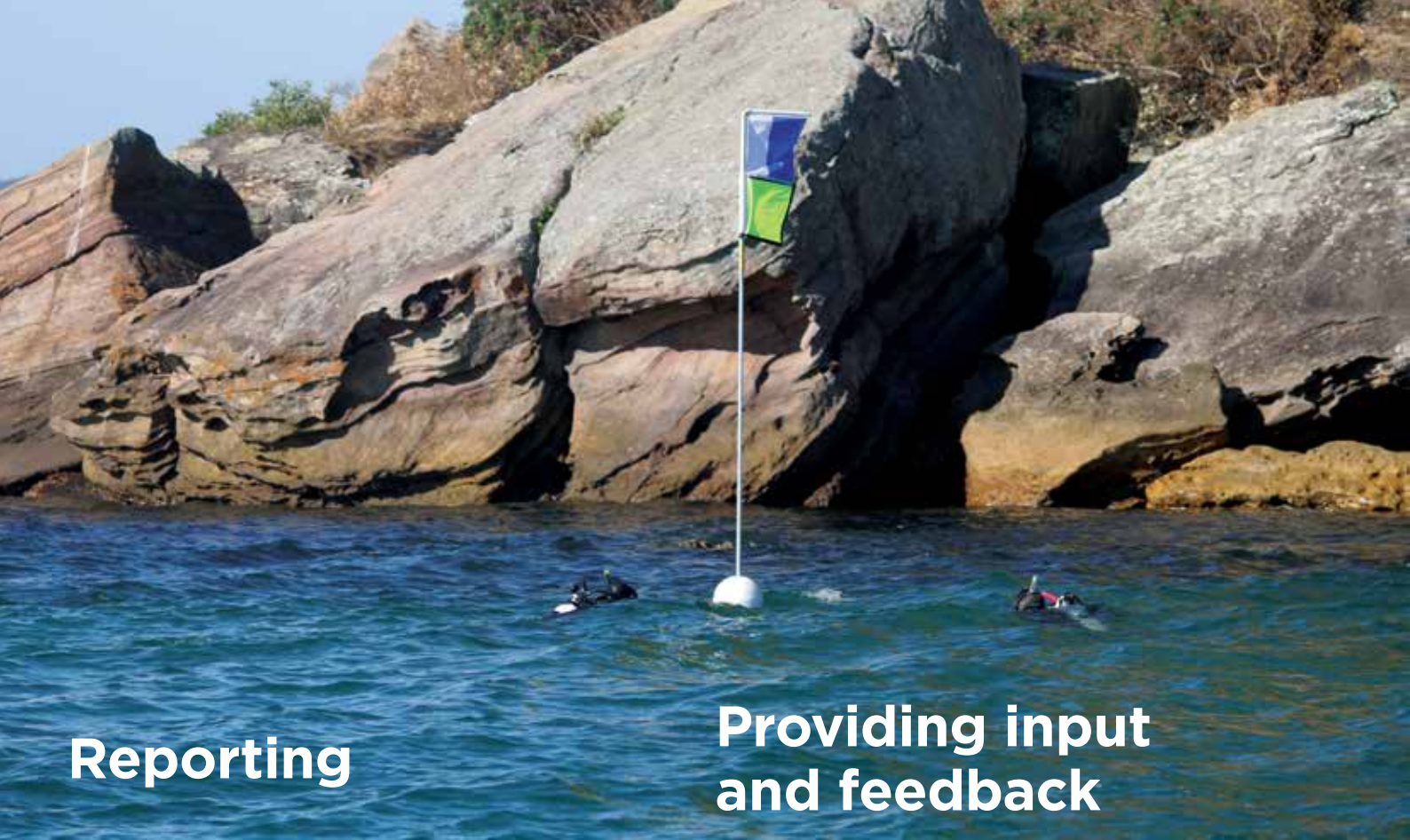
## Safety partners

There are a range of partners who could help improve the uptake of this strategy and these include the following:

- Accredited Training Providers e.g. TAFE, boating colleges, SCUBA instructors, Marine Teachers Association NSW
- Marine industries and stakeholder groups working with peak boating and dive groups to disseminate and reinforce boating safety messages throughout their networks of members and supporters
- State, Federal and International organisations.



Picture above: Snorkeler with personal float flag combination including high viz flag addition and high viz sock float.



## Reporting

RMS, as the operational deliver agency will provide information on the uptake and success of this strategy and associated safety videos at quarterly meetings of the Boating Safety and Education Compliance Committee.

## Providing input and feedback

Comments and suggestions are welcomed and should be forwarded to:

**Maritime Management Centre**  
PO Box K659  
HAYMARKET NSW 1240  
[maritime@transport.nsw.gov.au](mailto:maritime@transport.nsw.gov.au)

Picture above: SCUBA divers with 2m flag and float and recommended high viz addition.

Picture right: Spearo entering the water with personal float flag combination.



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For further enquiries:  
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