

## Auto Pilots

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Nothing exempts you from the requirements of the [International and Inland Navigation Rules of the Road](#). Conduct of vessels in any condition of visibility: Rule 5 – Look-Out: Every vessel shall at all times maintain a proper look-out by sight and hearing as well as by all available means appropriate in the prevailing circumstances and conditions so as to make a full appraisal of the situation and of the risk of collision.

Auto-pilot systems can reduce the monotony of steering by freeing you up to step away from the helm in order to perform other minor pilot house tasks and gain different navigational viewpoints. There are also disadvantages that have the potential to lead to negligent navigational practices. Over-reliance on these systems can allow you to get too engrossed in performing other work on the bridge and, in some extreme cases, can lead to you leaving the helm for extended periods of time. This inattentiveness to the vessel's navigation has led to marine casualties. It should come as no surprise that when an inattentive operator meets with extreme circumstances, he or she usually has no time to take corrective actions.

Specific regulations govern the use of auto-pilots, and these regulations can be found throughout [46 Code of Federal Regulations](#), with specific applicability within the respective subchapters. (46 CFR 35.20-45, 46 CFR 97.16, 46 CFR 122.360, 46 CFR 131.960, and 46 CFR 185.360)

The general regulation found in 46 Code of Federal Regulations reads as follows: Use of Auto-Pilot – When the automatic pilot is used in areas of high traffic density, conditions of restricted visibility, or any other hazardous navigational situations, the master shall ensure that:

- It is possible to immediately establish manual control of the vessel's steering;
- A competent person is ready at all times to take over steering control; and
- The changeover from automatic to manual control of the vessel's steering and the reverse is made by, or under the supervision of, the master or officer of the watch