

September 5, 2001

Ms. Danielle Turner
3045 Evening Wind Street
Henderson, Nevada 89052

Dear Ms. Turner:

The River Management Society (RMS) has reviewed your proposal to have river personal flotation devices (PFD's), particularly rental PFD's, equipped with a knife. The RMS has long felt that it should share its expertise with those who ask for it and we believe we can help in an educational and informational campaign to improve whitewater safety. Your proposal was discussed by a number of RMS members who have many years of whitewater experience. Most of these RMS members manage various rivers for federal and state agencies.

After a careful examination of this issue, the RMS Policy Committee does not support the proposition that all river users have PFD's with knives attached. The decision to carry a knife, the type of knife, and when and how to carry it, are personal choices best left to individuals rather than mandated by a government agency or a private business. We know a number of river professionals, including rescue personnel, who always carry a knife on their PFD. There are also a number of others who carry a knife but do not attach it to the PFD. Nearly all agree - knives should only be carried by people trained to use them in emergency situations.

Deciding which type of knife to carry is problematic. There are a variety of knives each with their own advantages and disadvantages. Choices include folding/fixed blades, sharp/dull point, single edge/double edge, serrated/straight blade, etc. Design considerations affect how the knife may be deployed in an emergency situation. There is no consensus on the optimal design for a river knife. If PFD's were equipped with knives, training and competency would be required to use a knife appropriately. The issue of competency and training may arise for any organization attaching knives to life jackets they rent out to the public.

While a knife is an important piece of safety equipment, attaching them to PFD's can create a new set of hazards. Attaching a knife or anything else to a PFD increases the risk of entanglement. Knives can function as a line cleat and they can jam in rocks. We are aware of one case where a whistle on a PFD functioned as a rock nut on the bottom of a river. Fortunately, the split ring failed and let the person go. In another instance, a river ranger was involved in a flip and came up under the boat. The knife on the person's PFD entangled in a cargo net. Fortunately, the individual was able to get untangled and get to the surface. The individual has since sworn off both knives attached to life jackets and cargo nets over baggage loads. This individual still carries a knife, but not on the PFD.

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Another ranger rowing Westwater Canyon had his knife come out of its sheath. The knife handle bounced off the tube of the boat and went into the river. Another individual had a supposedly unbreakable plastic knife case come apart in his raft. He was going through a big rapid, and felt something bounce around his leg. He looked down and discovered that his razor sharp knife was on the bottom of his raft. Obviously, unsecured knives bouncing around a boat in rapids are a hazard to the boat and its occupants.

While we cannot support a policy of having a knife on every PFD, we strongly support production of safety materials and information that would stress reduction of the entanglement hazard. We see too many river runners who are tolerant of loose lines, straps and other entanglement hazards on their boat. A safety campaign stressing hazard awareness and zero tolerance for entanglement hazards would be most appropriate and useful in preventing future tragedies. Safety is best served by keeping the boat "ship shape" and free of entanglement/entrapment hazards. This breaks the accident chain very early in the trip. Preventing the entrapment is far superior to extricating from it. Such a campaign could also point out the desirability of having a knife available in case an entanglement occurs. This type of campaign leaves the choice of knife, who should carry it and where it is carried to the individual. The RMS is prepared to offer technical expertise in the preparation of these safety messages. We would also be willing to assist with distribution through our member agencies, general membership and web site.

Sincerely,

Barry Beasley
President, River Management Society

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