



BRUCE WILLEY

Paint It Black

Port District ordered to cover red stripe on lighthouse

by Bruce Willey

Lighthouses

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From the experienced mariner to the two-cent sailor, the seamanship navigation adage "Red Right Returning" has guided boaters to safe harbor for centuries. In other words, when returning to port, boaters know to keep red navigational aids to the starboard, or right side and green to their port, or left, side. It also happens to be a longstanding Coast Guard regulation that navigation aids such as buoys, beacons, markers and lighthouses be colored according to the laws of the U.S. System of Aids to Navigation.

So when ex-Coast Guardsman Paul Cogswell noticed a red stripe around the top of the lighthouse guarding the Santa Cruz Harbor, he saw a contradiction to the navigational regulations. Cogswell owns Cogswell's Marine Engine, Inc., a boat repair business in Santa Cruz.

The 40-foot-high lighthouse, which sits to the left of vessels returning from the high seas, does possess a flashing green light. But Cogswell considers the red stripe just below the light a hazard that could confuse mariners, guiding them straight into the rocks on the wrong side of the harbor entrance. As he put it in a Jan. 27 letter to the commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard in Washington D.C., the red stripe could potentially cause "an unfortunate maritime disaster."

"We have low and heavy fog, and there are times when the light will just not work," says Cogswell. "Lights break, they are not infallible, and a transient mariner could be coming through and mistake the color on that (navigational) aid and there could be a catastrophe".

But it looks like a disaster will be averted. As a result of Cogswell's missive, the Coast Guard has ordered the harbor to paint the red stripe black. The Santa Cruz Port District has until April 1 to comply.

Santa Cruz Harbor port director Brian Foss says there's a one in a million chance that a mariner would mistake the red stripe for a navigation aid. Lighthouses, he says, have a long tradition of

having distinctive marking and colors. "Lighthouses come in every shape, size, color on earth, and they're all unique, which is what makes them neat," adds Foss.

The stripe was painted on the newly erected lighthouse shortly after it was dedicated last June. "We wanted to give it a distinctive mark, plus red is the best color to see through fog—the wavelengths are such that red is better than other colors," Foss says. "We think the Coast Guard is erring very, very conservatively here. The chances of mistaking a major light, which they (the Coast Guard) consider lighthouses to be, as a mid-channel marker is extremely remote. But if they want us to paint it black, we'll paint it black. It's not a big deal."

The green light on the harbor lighthouse differentiates between it and the Mark Abbott Memorial Lighthouse at Lighthouse Point, which has a white revolving light. A buoy sporting a red light serves as the major channel marker. The harbor lighthouse, Foss says, should be used as geographical reference point, not a navigational tool. "And you shouldn't be aiming for it because it's got real hard things underneath it," he says.

Foss admits the harbor can be tricky to sail into, especially in the winter months, because of the angle of approach. Eventually the harbor would like to install range markers which sailors can line up to get into the channel more safely.

Lieutenant Jerry Johnson, one of the Coast Guard officers who responded to Cogswell's complaint, says he's never seen a problem quite like this, but says the red stripe could possibly cause some confusion to some mariners. "We just didn't want that to happen," Johnson says.

So come April 1 the stripe that matched so many sunsets over the last few months will be painted the color of night.

"It was confusing to me the first day I saw it," says Cogswell. "I don't care if there's even a possibility that that stripe could cause someone to be hurt or injured. We shouldn't lose a life over a bucket of paint."