So What’s So Great About Level 50 Devices?
By Rolf Popp and Wayne Walters

The introduction of the North American Harmonized Standard ANSI UL 12402-5 has led to many discussions about the possibility of Level 50 devices entering the US market. So what’s so great about Level 50 devices, and are they being worn?

To answer this question let’s look at where it began: The European Common Market Directives for Product Safety were launched in 1989 and implemented the European Directive for Personal Protective Devices (PPE). This directive covers all PPE, including Personal Flotation Devices (PFDs).

PPEs were designed, manufactured, tested, and certified in accordance with individual EU Standards based on the EU Directive. In 2004 these directives were harmonized into the current CEN ISO 12402 series of standards with parts 2 to 5, based on a device’s intended use and performance level. These range from the highest offshore, rough water, extended time-to-rescue life jacket classification of the level 275 in part 2, to the calm water, near shore, rescue-close-at-hand Level 50 buoyancy aid classification of part 5. To help the users choose the life jacket that is most suitable for their specific activity and environment, labels were developed with icons depicting the conditions or environments for intended use.

In Europe, 80 percent of PFDs are used in leisure activities in environments where the Level 50 device is appropriate and accepted. The Level 50 allows for a wide variety of designs that incorporate activity-specific features to protect the user, while also allowing for maximum comfort, less bulk, increased mobility, and finally fashionable colors and styles. The ISO Standard recognizes that the Level 50 device has less flotation (11.2#), and that it is not designed to turn an unconscious wearer face-up in the water. However the important thing to note here is its “wearability” success. It’s intended for users that are comfortable in the water with the ability to swim, and where rescue is presumed to be close at hand. The Level 50 is also required to be worn, and has been an important and very successful option for the European boating community for the past 25 years.

In the U.S., the Type III device has been used in this same way for the past 40 years. While the Type III device has similar performance requirements to the Level 50 device, its main difference is that it is required to have a minimum of 70N (15.5#) of buoyancy. This positions it between the ISO categories of the Level 50 and level 100. The current Type III device has the variation of design and fashion similar to the Level 50, but with about 40 percent more buoyancy. It is not required to be worn to meet carriage requirements, and in many cases it’s not.

Every year in the U.S. approximately 500 people die because they are not wearing a life jacket. In developing the North American Harmonized Standard, our hope is to reduce this number by offering a more comfortable design that will appeal to a variety of users for their specific activities, and by making the decision to purchase a device that must be worn, will ensure that it is when they need it to save their lives.

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