

# 33 CFR Part 329

## Definition of Navigable Waters of the US

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**AUTHORITY:** 33 U.S.C. 401 et seq.

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### Section 329.1 - Purpose

This regulation defines the term "navigable waters of the United States" as it is used to define authorities of the Corps of Engineers. It also prescribes the policy, practice and procedure to be used in determining the extent of the jurisdiction of the Corps of Engineers and in answering inquiries concerning "navigable waters of the United States." This definition does not apply to authorities under the Clean Water Act which definitions are described under 33 CFR Parts 323 and 328.

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## **Section 329.2 - Applicability**

This regulation is applicable to all Corps of Engineers districts and divisions having civil works responsibilities.

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## **Section 329.3 - General policies**

Precise definitions of "navigable waters of the United States" or "navigability" are ultimately dependent on judicial interpretation and cannot be made conclusively by administrative agencies. However, the policies and criteria contained in this regulation are in close conformance with the tests used by Federal courts and determinations made under this regulation are considered binding in regard to the activities of the Corps of Engineers.

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## **Section 329.4 - General definition**

Navigable waters of the United States are those waters that are subject to the ebb and flow of the tide and/or are presently used, or have been used in the past, or may be susceptible for use to transport interstate or foreign commerce. A determination of navigability, once made, applies laterally over the entire surface of the waterbody, and is not extinguished by later actions or events which impede or destroy navigable capacity.

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## **Section 329.5 General scope of determination**

The several factors which must be examined when making a determination whether a waterbody is a navigable water of the United States are discussed in detail below. Generally, the following conditions must be satisfied:

- a. Past, present, or potential presence of interstate or foreign commerce;
  - b. Physical capabilities for use by commerce as in paragraph (a) of this section; and
  - c. Defined geographic limits of the waterbody.
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## **Section 329.6 - Interstate or foreign commerce**

- a. Nature of commerce: type, means, and extent of use. The types of commercial use of a waterway are extremely varied and will depend on the character of the region, its

products, and the difficulties or dangers of navigation. It is the waterbody's capability of use by the public for purposes of transportation of commerce which is the determinative factor, and not the time, extent or manner of that use. As discussed in Section 329.9 of this Part, it is sufficient to establish the potential for commercial use at any past, present, or future time. Thus, sufficient commerce may be shown by historical use of canoes, bateaux, or other frontier craft, as long as that type of boat was common or well-suited to the place and period. Similarly, the particular items of commerce may vary widely, depending again on the region and period. The goods involved might be grain, furs, or other commerce of the time. Logs are a common example; transportation of logs has been a substantial and well-recognized commercial use of many navigable waters of the United States. Note, however, that the mere presence of floating logs will not of itself make the river "navigable"; the logs must have been related to a commercial venture. Similarly, the presence of recreational craft may indicate that a waterbody is capable of bearing some forms of commerce, either presently, in the future, or at a past point in time.

- b. Nature of commerce: interstate and intrastate. Interstate commerce may of course be existent on an intrastate voyage which occurs only between places within the same state. It is only necessary that goods may be brought from, or eventually be destined to go to, another state. (For purposes of this regulation, the term "interstate commerce" hereinafter includes "foreign commerce" as well.)

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## **Section 329.7 - Intrastate or interstate nature of waterway**

A waterbody may be entirely within a state, yet still be capable of carrying interstate commerce. This is especially clear when it physically connects with a generally acknowledged avenue of interstate commerce, such as the ocean or one of the Great Lakes, and is yet wholly within one state. Nor is it necessary that there be a physically navigable connection across a state boundary. Where a waterbody extends through one or more states, but substantial portions, which are capable of bearing interstate commerce, are located in only one of the states, the entirety of the waterway up to the head (upper limit) of navigation is subject to Federal jurisdiction.

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## **Section 329.8 - Improved or natural conditions of the waterbody**

Determinations are not limited to the natural or original condition of the waterbody. Navigability may also be found where artificial aids have been or may be used to make the waterbody suitable for use in navigation.

- a. **Existing improvements: artificial waterbodies.**

1. An artificial channel may often constitute a navigable water of the United States, even though it has been privately developed and maintained, or passes through private property. The test is generally as developed above, that is, whether the waterbody is capable of use to transport interstate commerce. Canals which connect two navigable waters of the United States and which are used for commerce clearly fall within the test, and themselves become navigable. A canal open to navigable waters of the United States on only one end is itself navigable where it in fact supports interstate commerce. A canal or other artificial waterbody that is subject to ebb and flow of the tide is also a navigable water of the United States.
  2. The artificial waterbody may be a major portion of a river or harbor area or merely a minor backwash, slip, or turning area (see paragraph 329.12(b) of this Part).
  3. Private ownership of the lands underlying the waterbody, or of the lands through which it runs, does not preclude a finding of navigability. Ownership does become a controlling factor if a privately constructed and operated canal is not used to transport interstate commerce nor used by the public; it is then not considered to be a navigable water of the United States. However, a private waterbody, even though not itself navigable, may so affect the navigable capacity of nearby waters as to nevertheless be subject to certain regulatory authorities.
- b. **Non-existing improvements, past or potential.** A waterbody may also be considered navigable depending on the feasibility of use to transport interstate commerce after the construction of whatever "reasonable" improvements may potentially be made. The improvement need not exist, be planned, nor even authorized; it is enough that potentially they could be made. What is a "reasonable" improvement is always a matter of degree; there must be a balance between cost and need at a time when the improvement would be (or would have been) useful. Thus, if an improvement were "reasonable" at a time of past use, the water was therefore navigable in law from that time forward. The changes in engineering practices or the coming of new industries with varying classes of freight may affect the type of the improvement; those which may be entirely reasonable in a thickly populated, highly developed industrial region may have been entirely too costly for the same region in the days of the pioneers. The determination of reasonable improvement is often similar to the cost analyses presently made in Corps of Engineers studies.

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## Section 329.9 - Time at which commerce exists or determination is made

- a. **Past use.** A waterbody which was navigable in its natural or improved state, or which was susceptible of reasonable improvement (as discussed in paragraph 329.8(b) of this Part) retains its character as "navigable in law" even though it is not presently used for commerce, or is presently incapable of such use because of changed conditions or the presence of obstructions. Nor does absence of use because of changed economic conditions affect the legal character of the waterbody. Once having attained the character of "navigable in law," the Federal authority remains in existence, and cannot be abandoned by administrative officers or court action. Nor is mere inattention or ambiguous action by Congress an abandonment of Federal control. However, express statutory declarations by Congress that described portions of a waterbody are non-navigable, or have been abandoned, are binding upon the Department of the Army. Each statute must be carefully examined, since Congress often reserves the power to amend the Act, or assigns special duties of supervision and control to the Secretary of the Army or Chief of Engineers.
- b. **Future or potential use.** Navigability may also be found in a waterbody's susceptibility for use in its ordinary condition or by reasonable improvement to transport interstate commerce. This may be either in its natural or improved condition, and may thus be existent although there has been no actual use to date. Non-use in the past therefore does not prevent recognition of the potential for future use.

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## Section 329.10 - Existence of obstructions

A stream may be navigable despite the existence of falls, rapids, sand bars, bridges, portages, shifting currents, or similar obstructions. Thus, a waterway in its original condition might have had substantial obstructions which were overcome by frontier boats and/or portages, and nevertheless be a "channel" of commerce, even though boats had to be removed from the water in some stretches, or logs be brought around an obstruction by means of artificial chutes. However, the question is ultimately a matter of degree, and it must be recognized that there is some point beyond which navigability could not be established.

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## Section 329.11 - Geographic and jurisdictional limits of rivers and lakes

- a. **Jurisdiction over entire bed.** Federal regulatory jurisdiction, and powers of improvement for navigation, extend laterally to the entire water surface and bed of a navigable waterbody, which includes all the land and waters below the ordinary high water mark. Jurisdiction thus extends to the edge (as determined above) of all such waterbodies, even though portions of the waterbody may be extremely shallow, or obstructed by shoals, vegetation or other barriers. Marshlands and similar areas are thus considered navigable in law, but only so far as the area is subject to inundation by

the ordinary high waters.

1. The "**ordinary high water mark**" on non-tidal rivers is the line on the shore established by the fluctuations of water and indicated by physical characteristics such as a clear, natural line impressed on the bank; shelving; changes in the character of soil; destruction of terrestrial vegetation; the presence of litter and debris; or other appropriate means that consider the characteristics of the surrounding areas.
  2. **Ownership** of a river or lake bed or of the lands between high and low water marks will vary according to state law; however, private ownership of the underlying lands has no bearing on the existence or extent of the dominant Federal jurisdiction over a navigable waterbody.
- b. **Upper limit of navigability.** The character of a river will, at some point along its length, change from navigable to non-navigable. Very often that point will be at a major fall or rapids, or other place where there is a marked decrease in the navigable capacity of the river. The upper limit will therefore often be the same point traditionally recognized as the head of navigation, but may, under some of the tests described above, be at some point yet farther upstream.

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## Section 329.12 - Geographic and jurisdictional limits of oceanic and tidal waters

- a. **Ocean and coastal waters.** The navigable waters of the United States over which Corps of Engineers regulatory jurisdiction extends include all ocean and coastal waters within a zone three geographic (nautical) miles seaward from the baseline (The Territorial Seas). Wider zones are recognized for special regulatory powers exercised over the outer continental shelf. (See 33 CFR 322.3(b)).
  1. **Baseline defined.** Generally, where the shore directly contacts the open sea, the line on the shore reached by the ordinary low tides comprises the baseline from which the distance of three geographic miles is measured. The baseline has significance for both domestic and international law and is subject to precise definitions. Special problems arise when offshore rocks, islands, or other bodies exist, and the baseline may have to be drawn seaward of such bodies.
  2. **Shoreward limit of jurisdiction.** Regulatory jurisdiction in coastal areas extends to the line on the shore reached by the plane of the mean (average) high water. Where precise determination of the actual location of the line becomes necessary, it must be established by survey with reference to the available tidal

datum, preferably averaged over a period of 18.6 years. Less precise methods, such as observation of the "apparent shoreline" which is determined by reference to physical markings, lines of vegetation, or changes in type of vegetation, may be used only where an estimate is needed of the line reached by the mean high water.

- b. **Bays and estuaries.** Regulatory jurisdiction extends to the entire surface and bed of all waterbodies subject to tidal action. Jurisdiction thus extends to the edge (as determined by paragraph (a)(2) of this section) of all such waterbodies, even though portions of the waterbody may be extremely shallow, or obstructed by shoals, vegetation, or other barriers. Marshlands and similar areas are thus considered "navigable in law," but only so far as the area is subject to inundation by the mean high waters. The relevant test is therefore the presence of the mean high tidal waters, and not the general test described above, which generally applies to inland rivers and lakes.

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## Section 329.13 - Geographic limits: shifting boundaries

Permanent changes of the shoreline configuration result in similar alterations of the boundaries of the navigable waters of the United States. Thus, gradual changes which are due to natural causes and are perceptible only over some period of time constitute changes in the bed of a waterbody which also change the shoreline boundaries of the navigable waters of the United States. However, an area will remain "navigable in law," even though no longer covered with water, whenever the change has occurred suddenly, or was caused by artificial forces intended to produce that change. For example, shifting sand bars within a river or estuary remain part of the navigable water of the United States, regardless that they may be dry at a particular point in time.

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## Section 329.14 - Determination of navigability

- a. **Effect on determinations.** Although conclusive determinations of navigability can be made only by federal Courts, those made by federal agencies are nevertheless accorded substantial weight by the courts. It is therefore necessary that when jurisdictional questions arise, district personnel carefully investigate those waters which may be subject to Federal regulatory jurisdiction under guidelines set out above, as the resulting determination may have substantial impact upon a judicial body. Official determinations by an agency made in the past can be revised or reversed as necessary to reflect changed rules or interpretations of the law.
- b. **Procedures of determination.** A determination whether a waterbody is a navigable water of the United States will be made by the division engineer, and will be based on a

report of findings prepared at the district level in accordance with the criteria set out in this regulation. Each report of findings will be prepared by the district engineer, accompanied by an opinion of the district counsel, and forwarded to the division engineer for final determination. Each report of findings will be based substantially on applicable portions of the format in paragraph (c) of this section.

c. **Suggested format** of report of findings:

1. Name of waterbody:

2. Tributary to:

3. Physical characteristics:

- i. Type: (river, bay, slough, estuary, etc.)
- ii. Length:
- iii. Approximate discharge volumes: Maximum, Minimum, Mean:
- iv. Fall per mile:
- v. Extent of tidal influence:
- vi. Range between ordinary high and ordinary low water:
- vii. Description of improvements to navigation not listed in paragraph (c)(5) of this section:

4. Nature and location of significant obstructions to navigation in portions of the waterbody used or potentially capable of use in interstate commerce:

5. Authorized projects:

- i. Nature, condition and location of any improvements made under projects authorized by Congress:
- ii. Description of projects authorized but not constructed:
- iii. List of known survey documents or reports describing the waterbody:

6. Past or present interstate commerce:

- i. General types, extent, and period in time:
- ii. Documentation if necessary:

7. Potential use for interstate commerce, if applicable:

- i. If in natural condition:
- ii. If improved:



8. Nature of jurisdiction known to have been exercised by Federal agencies if any:
  9. State or Federal court decisions relating to navigability of the waterbody, if any:
  10. Remarks:
  11. Finding of navigability (with date) and recommendation for determination:
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## **Section 329.15 - Inquiries regarding determinations**

- a. Findings and determinations should be made whenever a question arises regarding the navigability of a waterbody. Where no determination has been made, a report of findings will be prepared and forwarded to the division engineer, as described above. Inquiries may be answered by an interim reply which indicates that a final agency determination must be made by the division engineer. If a need develops for an emergency determination, district engineers may act in reliance on a finding prepared as in Section 329.14 of this Part. The report of findings should then be forwarded to the division engineer on an expedited basis.
- b. Where determinations have been made by the division engineer, inquiries regarding the navigability of specific portions of waterbodies covered by these determinations may be answered as follows:

This Department, in the administration of the laws enacted by Congress for the protection and preservation of the navigable waters of the United States, has determined that (River) (Bay) (Lake, etc.) is a navigable water of the United States from mile to mile. Actions which modify or otherwise affect those waters are subject to the jurisdiction of this Department, whether such actions occur within or outside the navigable areas.

- c. Specific inquiries regarding the jurisdiction of the Corps of Engineers can be answered only after a determination whether
    1. the waters are navigable waters of the United States or
    2. if not navigable, whether the proposed type of activity may nevertheless so affect the navigable waters of the United States that the assertion of regulatory jurisdiction is deemed necessary.
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## **Section 329.16 - Use and maintenance of lists of determinations.**

- a. Tabulated lists of final determinations of navigability are to be maintained in each district office, and be updated as necessitated by court decisions, jurisdictional inquiries, or other changed conditions.
- b. It should be noted that the lists represent only those waterbodies for which determinations have been made; absence from that list should not be taken as an indication that the waterbody is not navigable.
- c. Deletions from the list are not authorized. If a change in status of a waterbody from navigable to non-navigable is deemed necessary, an updated finding should be forwarded to the division engineer; changes are not considered final until a determination has been made by the division engineer.