

Sea Condition Information for Okinawa

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CAMP FOSTER - Death by drowning is one of the greatest threats to the military population on Okinawa. With 31 SoFA Status drowning fatalities and numerous rescues reported between 1994 and 2010, the island is recognized as the most hazardous duty location world-wide in terms of recreational water activity participation. To address this issue, the military service components on island established sea condition standards in the early 1990's to set boundaries for safe water entry by informing personnel of current sea states. Conditions were based on wind speed criteria using the Beaufort Wind Scale and observed water conditions at Kadena Marina, Okuma Joint Services Recreational Facility, Camp Schwab Oura Wan Bay, and White Beach. These standards were set for the entire coastline of the island using three conditions; Green (ideal conditions), Yellow (use caution) and Red (no entry). Kadena's 18th Weather Flight was charged with implementing the standards and announcing sea conditions on a continual basis.



During the late 1990's, the criteria was re-visited after numerous complaints were raised about the one condition standard for all of Okinawa. Under the original standard, a significant number of days were restricted for water entry although one side of the island often experienced ideal conditions. As a result, new definitions and criteria were developed by dividing the island into two sectors, East and West which remain in effect today. Okinawa is currently the only known duty location in which the armed forces utilizes sea state criteria to regulate water entry for personnel.

As of 01 April 2011, modifications were made to the sea condition program to more easily assist water enthusiasts with making informed decisions when planning their ocean water activities. These changes were necessary after it was determined past information and categories were too perplexing and confusing for beachgoers, especially the abbreviations displayed on Okinawa's Armed Forces Network (AFN) television. Representatives from all four services on Okinawa worked collectively to develop new criteria utilizing earlier standards, the Beaufort Wind Scale, and knowledge from a variety of experts working in the fields of weather, safety, and recreation.

The most significant changes noticeable are adjustments to the sea condition categories and their definitions which are short and easy to understand. Previously, the three conditions comprising of Caution, Warning, and Red had lengthy explanations with similarities in the definitions for sea conditions Caution and Warning, both of which stated to be cautious when entering the water. The new conditions all have separate meanings even the most novice swimmers can comprehend. Sea conditions are simply-stated as ALL CLEAR, CAUTION, and DANGER. ALL CLEAR conditions are ideal for water related activities. This is the most suitable time for less skilled swimmers and children to participate in aquatic activities. When condition CAUTION is in effect, hazardous conditions may exist so personnel should exercise caution when entering the water. It is highly recommended that only individuals with extensive experience, both for the planned water activity and entry point location, enter the water. If sea condition DANGER is announced, life threatening conditions are occurring and water entry is prohibited for all activities.

Sea conditions are identified by two geographical sectors; East and West. The East represents Okinawa's shoreline facing the Pacific Ocean from the Northern tip of Hedo Point to Cape Kiyon on the Southern most part of the island. The West sector includes the entire coastline exposed to the East China Sea from Hedo Point in the North to Cape Kiyon in the South. When displayed on AFN, sea conditions are abbreviated as "C" for CAUTION and "D" for DANGER and along with "E" for East and "W" for West. For example, sea condition East CAUTION and West DANGER is

displayed on your television screen as EW/WD. When condition ALL CLEAR is in effect, no sea condition abbreviations will be displayed on television.

It is important to note that sea conditions are a good reference point when planning water activities; however, personnel are highly encouraged to monitor local weather and ocean conditions as they can change with little warning. Sea conditions and the criteria are based on a generalized evaluation and may not always accurately reflect the weather and sea state throughout the entire coastline of Okinawa as both can change in a moment's notice. Therefore, personnel must have the knowledge to make an individual assessment of the hazards for their intended activity during sea conditions ALL CLEAR and CAUTION. Indicators that the area may not be ideal for water entry include the presence of currents, large surf, and difficult entry and exit routes. If there are any doubts, it's best to stay on shore. There are plenty of other opportunities to participate in water activities throughout the year and pushing one's luck by entering the water during questionable sea conditions is a decision with far-reaching consequences. To review the new sea condition information visit the Marine Corps Base Camp Butler webpage at <http://www.marines.mil/unit/mcbbutler/Pages/SeaConditions.aspx>.