

2013 Vessel General Permit FAQ

Q. What does the VGP mean in terms of the lubricants I use on my ship?

A. The 2013 VGP mandates the use of a new class of environmentally acceptable lubricants under certain conditions.

Q. What is an environmentally acceptable lubricant?

A. An environmentally acceptable lubricant (EAL) is a lubricating material shown to have minimal toxicity and bioaccumulation potential, and superior biodegradability compared to traditional lubricants. In simple terms an EAL is an oil that doesn't kill fish or humans, doesn't build up in fish or humans, and breaks down in water in a matter of days or months (not years).

Q. What kinds of EALs are commercially available?

A. The three main types are vegetable oils, synthetic esters, and polyalkylene glycols (PAGs). Ester-based EALs are the most common type you will find available in the market.

Q. Are EALS more expensive than the lubricants I use now?

A. The EPA found through market research that EALs are on average 38% more expensive than conventional lubricants.

Q. How do I know I'm buying a certified EAL?

A. The EAL should carry the EPA Safer Choice Label or one of the various European labels that certify the lubricant's performance, biodegradability, and low toxicity. These European labels include Blue Angel, Swedish Standard, Nordic Swan, and the EU Ecolabel.

Most major manufacturers make EALs including ExxonMobil, Castrol, Total, Vickers, Klüber, Lukoil, Terresolve, and Panolin.

Q. For what equipment does the VGP say I now have to use EALs?

A. VGP states "all vessels must use an EAL in all oil to sea interfaces, unless technically infeasible".

Q. What does "oil-to-sea interface" mean?

A. Any equipment that is in contact with or immersed in water during operation at sea. This applies to below deck equipment: stabilizers, thrusters, rudders, controllable pitch propellers, stern tubes, etc. The EPA encourages but does not require the use of EALs in above-deck equipment.

Q. What does "technically infeasible" mean?

A. The EPA will waive the requirement for you to use EAL if the owner/operator of your vessel finds it unworkable to make the changeover EALs for valid technical reasons and provides a credible explanation in their records. Examples taken from the VGP Fact Sheet:

- i. “A class society says EALs are not appropriate for a particular use, or the vendor has not specified that EALs are appropriate for that piece of equipment (e.g., if a vendor only allows the vessel operator to use approved products and there are no approved EALs),”
 - ii. “the vessel owner/operator or his authorized representative determines that there is a lack of supporting equipment or use of EALs is incompatible with the operations and/or operating environment of the ship and loads on the system”

- Q. I don’t plan to change to switch over lubricants until my next dry dock, am I violating the VGP if I keep using my current set of lubricants?
 - A. You are not violating the VGP if you thoroughly and clearly document your intention and schedule for the changeover.

- Q. If I’m adding a new build vessel to my fleet can I claim technical infeasibility for that as well?
 - A. Yes but it is much harder to get that approved. From the fact sheet: “New build vessels can select equipment during design and construction which is compatible with EALs”.

- Q. Who enforces the VGP and how do they do it?
 - A. Vessel operators are expected to self-report EAL usage and/or their documentation for technical infeasibility. Coast Guard performs random checks to validate vessel compliance.

- Q. What happens if the Coast Guard says my vessel does not comply?
 - A. Under the Clean Water Act the EPA and Coast Guard have the authority to administer warnings, fines, and judicial action. What action is taken depends on how much and for how long the vessel is out of compliance.

- Q. I switched over to EALs, am I allowed to dump now since they are biodegradable?
 - A. Even though the spill would have less severe impacts than a mineral oil spill the VGP “does not authorize [intentional] discharge of any lubricant in a quantity that may be harmful”.

- Q. Where can I find the 2013 VGP and other important documents?
 - A. https://www3.epa.gov/npdes/pubs/vgp_permit2013.pdf
https://www3.epa.gov/npdes/pubs/vgp_fact_sheet2013.pdf

- Q. So I don’t have to read 200 pages, where are the important parts about lubricants located?
 - A. 2013 VGP
 - iii. Page 47 : general mandate
 - iv. Page 70: how to document your use of EAL
 - 2013 VGP Fact Sheet: pages 124–128

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