



Frequently Asked Questions

Who are the San Francisco Bar Pilots?

The San Francisco Bar Pilots are highly skilled master mariners who navigate commercial ships throughout the San Francisco and Monterey Bays, including ports as far as Stockton and Sacramento. Established in 1850 by California's first legislature, we have been protecting Northern California's pristine waters since the days of the Gold Rush.

San Francisco Bar Pilots board ships from all over the world in the open ocean, 11 miles west of the Golden Gate Bridge. We are on station and provide service 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

What does a San Francisco Bar Pilot do?

Our primary responsibility is to safely navigate ships over the offshore sand bar and through the navigable waters of the San Francisco Bay to more than 200 docks and maritime facilities in the greater Bay Area. Our detailed knowledge of the currents, channels, and navigational hazards of Northern California's bays and waterways combined with our expert ship handling skills ensure the safe and efficient transit of all commercial vessels. Many of the ships we pilot are over 1300 feet long, exceeding the height of Salesforce Tower, San Francisco's tallest building (1070 feet).

Are all ships required to use the services of a San Francisco Bar Pilot?

Nearly all commercial vessels are required by state law to use a licensed San Francisco Bar Pilot. Pilots are required in every major United

States port and in ports throughout the world. In the U.S., this includes harbors and ports along the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf coasts, as well as river systems. Across the globe, maritime pilots ensure the safe navigation of ships and the protection of the public and marine environment.

Is piloting in the San Francisco Bay different than in other ports?

The San Francisco Bay Area is known as one of the most challenging piloting grounds in the United States. It is also one of the largest in California, with more than 200 docks and maritime facilities and 160 miles of pilotage routes. Our pilotage grounds include environmental and geographic challenges not typical of any other pilotage grounds on the West Coast.





How are San Francisco Bar Pilots selected?

Trainee pilots are United States Coast Guard licensed mariners selected by the California Board of Pilot Commissioners. Typically, these candidates have college degrees and an average 15 or more years of experience. Candidates must pass a competitive written examination and simulator evaluation to be eligible for entry into the State's rigorous training program. Only upon the successful completion of the training program is a candidate eligible for licensing as a San Francisco Bar Pilot. Details of the selection process and training program can be found on the Board of Pilot Commissioners website.

Does a Bar Pilot undergo any sort of continued training?

The Board of Pilot Commissioners requires every licensed pilot to participate in a continuing professional development program. There are two forms of continued training every pilot must complete: combination courses on subjects such as emergency medical responses, bridge resource management, and advanced electronic navigation systems; and scaled manned model ship handling courses.

Training on scale model ships provides a realistic experience with the maneuvering characteristics of the type of commercial vessels that routinely transit the waters in the pilotage area. Training is conducted on a controlled lake facility that replicates conditions that are found on the San Francisco Bay. Using these models, pilots may safely and effectively practice challenging ship handling maneuvers and emergency situations that may not be encountered in routine pilotage.

Who regulates the San Francisco Bar Pilots?

The San Francisco Bar Pilots are regulated by both the United States Coast Guard and the California Board of Pilot Commissioners. The Board of Pilot Commissioners provides extensive regulatory oversight and is responsible for detailed regulations governing the San Francisco Bar Pilots, including rigorous physical examinations.

How are pilotage rates determined?

The rates that vessels pay for pilotage services are established by California law in a published rate schedule. The same rates are paid by all customers. Any party directly affected by pilotage rates may petition the California Board of Pilot Commissioners to hold an evidentiary hearing to determine whether a change in the rates is warranted. The Board makes rate recommendations to the State Legislature, which then go through the legislative process and, if approved, become law.

How is pilot income determined?

The rates charged by the San Francisco Bar Pilots for pilot services are set by law. Overall revenue depends primarily on the number of ships piloted and ship size.

San Francisco Bar Pilots are not employees and do not earn a salary. Pilots are self-employed individuals who pay typical self-employment expenses including payroll taxes and health care benefits.

All San Francisco Bar Pilots share the costs of operating the association, which includes the operation of five pilot boats and the shore-based pilot station located at Pier 9 in San Francisco. We currently have 35 employees. After all operating costs have been paid, the remaining revenue is divided equally among our membership.

