

CORE SYSTEMS

AMTG-006 | VERSION 1.0 | JULY 2026

Understanding Fire Detection and Suppression Systems

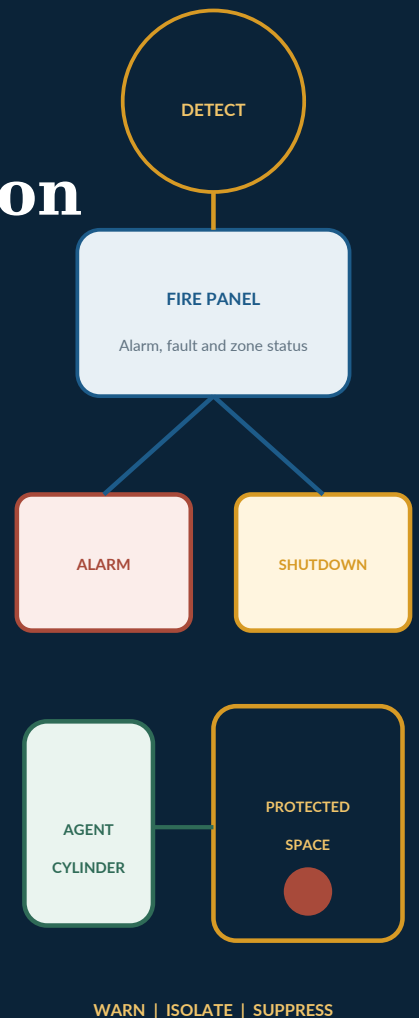
An owner's guide to early warning,
fixed protection and emergency response

A fire system provides warning and options.

Crew action, isolation and escape
determine whether those options remain usable.

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GUIDE OVERVIEW

What fire detection and suppression systems are designed to do

Fire protection systems provide early warning, help the crew identify the affected area and, where fitted, deliver an extinguishing agent to a protected space. They support the response; they do not replace prevention, escape planning or disciplined crew action.

SCOPE	This guide covers common arrangements in accommodation, machinery and service spaces. Actual requirements depend on yacht size, use, flag, coding, class, construction, protected volume and the installed equipment.
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By the end of this guide, you should be able to:

- Distinguish detection, alarm, shutdown and suppression as separate functions.
- Identify common detector types, alarm zones, release controls, cylinders, pipework and nozzles.
- Understand why protected-space integrity and ventilation shutdown matter to fixed systems.
- Recognise common faults, service limitations and signs that the system may not be ready.
- Ask better questions during purchase, survey, refit and offshore preparation.

CORE PRINCIPLE	A fixed system is only one layer. A credible fire response also depends on early warning, escape, fuel and power isolation, ventilation control, suitable portable equipment, communications and crew familiarity.
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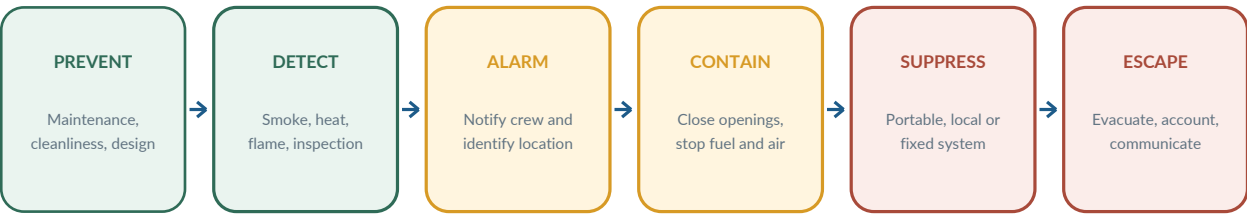
Safety

Fire and extinguishing agents can create fatal heat, smoke, toxic-gas, pressure, visibility and oxygen-deficiency hazards. Never enter or re-enter a smoke-filled or discharged space unless the vessel's procedure, atmosphere and available protective equipment make it safe.

SYSTEM OVERVIEW

Fire protection works in layers

The strongest outcome comes when prevention, detection, alarm, containment, suppression and escape support one another. Failure of one layer should not be allowed to remove every remaining option.



Fire safety relies on several layers. Suppression is not a substitute for detection, containment, escape or crew action.

The basic protection chain

- Prevention: Good installation, maintenance, housekeeping and control of ignition and fuel sources.
- Detection: Sensors or crew observation recognise smoke, heat, flame or another sign of fire.
- Alarm: Audible and visual warnings notify the crew and identify the affected zone.
- Containment: Closures, boundaries, shutdowns and ventilation control limit fire growth and agent loss.
- Suppression: Portable, local or fixed systems attack the fire with an agent suitable for the hazard.
- Escape and escalation: The crew leaves danger, accounts for everyone and communicates before options disappear.

Detection and suppression are not the same system

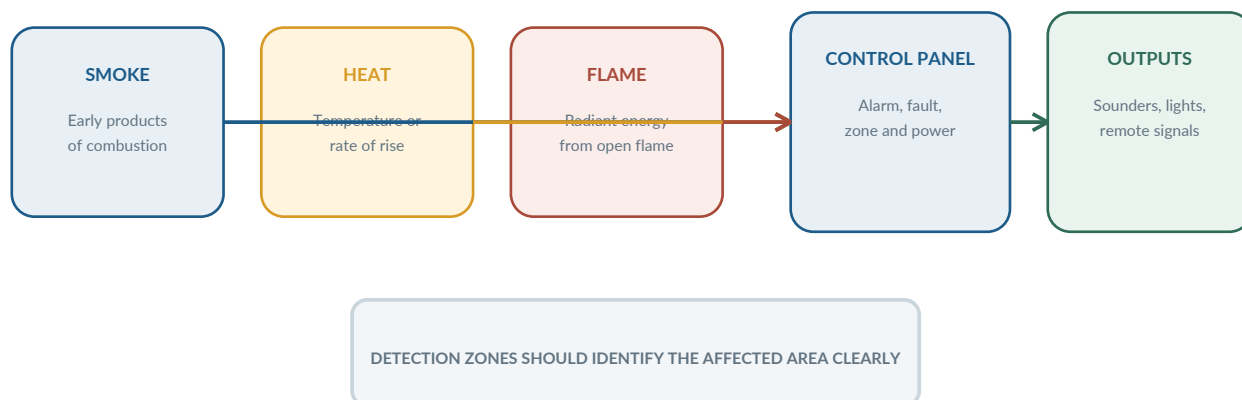
The detection panel may be connected to a fixed suppression system, but it may also operate independently. Some installations release automatically; others require manual confirmation. The owner should know exactly what the alarm does, what it does not do and which shutdowns occur before or after release.

OWNER EXERCISE	Choose one machinery space and trace the complete response: detector, panel zone, sounders, emergency stops, fuel shut-offs, dampers, release station, cylinder, pipework, nozzles and post-discharge indication.
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EARLY WARNING

Detectors, zones and coverage

Different detectors respond to different fire signatures. Selection and positioning should reflect the space, likely hazards, airflow, contamination and the consequences of nuisance or delayed alarm.



Detector type	Typical strength	Important limitation
Smoke detector	Can provide early warning of many smouldering or developing fires.	Steam, dust, cooking fumes, airflow and contamination can cause nuisance alarms or delayed response.
Heat detector	Useful where smoke detection would be affected by normal fumes, moisture or dust.	Usually responds later than well-positioned smoke detection because heat must build at the detector.
Flame detector	Can respond rapidly to visible or infrared/ultraviolet radiation from open flame.	Requires a suitable field of view and may be affected by shielding, contamination or false radiation sources.
Manual call point	Allows a person to raise the alarm immediately.	Provides no automatic warning and must remain visible, accessible and understood.

Coverage and zoning

- Detector location should reflect the actual airflow and geometry of the space.
- Large, divided or obstructed compartments may require several detection points.
- Zones should help the crew identify the affected area without ambiguity.
- Refits, new linings, machinery or ventilation changes can alter coverage.
- Carbon-monoxide alarms are valuable life-safety devices but are not a substitute for a fire-detection design.

**DO NOT DEFEAT
NUISANCE ALARMS**

Repeated false alarms should be investigated. Covering, isolating or permanently silencing a detector can remove the early warning the crew is relying upon.

CONTROL AND INDICATION

Panels, alarms, fault monitoring and power

The panel should make the system's condition obvious: normal, alarm, fault, isolated or discharged. A system with unclear indications is difficult to trust under pressure.

Feature	Purpose	Owner focus
Zone indication	Identifies where a detector or manual alarm has activated.	Labels should match the yacht and remain readable at the operating position.
Audible and visual alarms	Warns crew in occupied, sleeping and operating areas.	Confirm alarms can be heard or seen over machinery noise and with cabin doors closed.
Fault monitoring	Warns of open circuits, power failure, disabled zones or device faults.	A fault is not the same as a fire alarm, but it means protection may be reduced.
Silence and reset	Controls sounders and returns the panel after investigation.	Silencing should not erase the location or cause; repeated reset without investigation is poor practice.
Primary and backup power	Keeps detection and alarm available after normal supply loss.	Battery condition, charger, alarm indication and real endurance should be understood.
Remote indication	Repeats alarms at helm, crew area or monitoring system.	Confirm loss of the network or display does not remove local alarm capability.

Alarm response

- Treat every alarm as real until the affected area has been assessed safely.
- Do not open a hot or smoke-filled machinery space merely to confirm the fire.
- Use external viewing, cameras, temperature information or safe access where available.
- Raise the general alarm early and ensure the crew knows the escape and muster arrangement.
- Record faults and isolations so that reduced protection is visible to every watchkeeper.

SHARED DEPENDENCY	Detection, shutdown control and remote monitoring may share one power supply or network. Loss of that common service can remove several layers at once unless local or independent functions remain.
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FIXED SUPPRESSION

Agents, cylinders, pipework and protected volume

A fixed system is designed for a defined space, agent quantity and discharge arrangement. Changes to compartment volume, ventilation or machinery can affect whether the original design remains suitable.

System type	Typical characteristic	Important consideration
Gaseous clean-agent system	Discharges an agent through fixed nozzles, normally with little or no residue.	Effective concentration depends on protected volume and enclosure integrity; personnel and re-entry precautions are agent-specific.
Carbon-dioxide system	Provides total-flooding suppression in suitable unoccupied spaces.	Creates a severe asphyxiation hazard. Evacuation, warnings, isolation and controlled re-entry are critical.
Water-mist system	Uses fine droplets to cool and suppress fire while limiting water quantity.	Pump, water supply, nozzles, pressure and approved hazard coverage must remain correct.
Condensed-aerosol system	Produces a fire-suppressing aerosol from compact generators.	Visibility, residue, hot discharge components, enclosure and personnel guidance are installation-specific.
Local-application system	Targets a defined hazard such as cooking or machinery equipment.	Coverage is limited to the protected appliance or area and does not automatically protect the whole compartment.

Components to identify

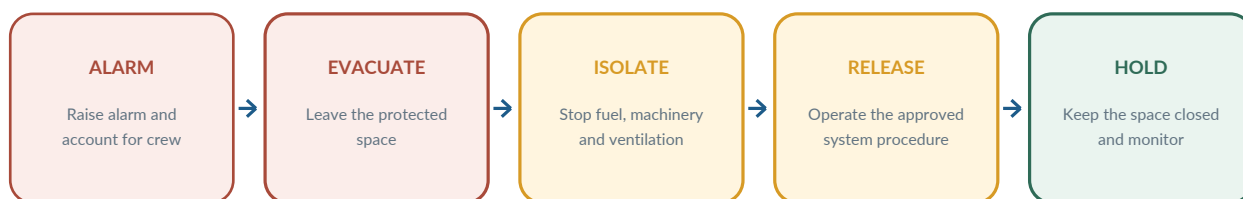
- Agent cylinder or generators, service label and pressure or weight indication where applicable.
- Automatic and manual release arrangements, safety pins, seals and status indicators.
- Distribution pipework and nozzles, including any signs of blockage, damage or alteration.
- Pre-discharge alarms and time delay where fitted.
- Links to engine, generator, fuel-pump, fan and damper shutdowns.
- Post-discharge indication and the system-specific procedure for making the space safe.

PROTECTED VOLUME MATTERS	Additional tanks, insulation, machinery removal, new openings or compartment alterations can change the free volume and leakage paths. A competent fire-system specialist should review material changes.
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CONTAINMENT AND RELEASE

Why shutdowns and space integrity matter

A total-flooding agent must remain at an effective concentration for long enough to suppress the fire. Fans, open dampers, running engines and unsealed openings can remove agent and continue feeding the fire.



This sequence is deliberately generic. The installed system's instructions and vessel emergency plan take priority.

Before release

- Raise the alarm and confirm that everyone has left the protected space.
- Stop machinery, fuel pumps and ventilation in accordance with the vessel's procedure.
- Close fire dampers, doors, hatches and other designated openings.
- Assess whether electrical isolation is required and can be carried out safely.
- Transmit urgency or distress information early when the fire may affect propulsion, power or abandonment options.

After release

- Keep the protected space closed unless the approved procedure requires otherwise.
- Do not restart fans, machinery or fuel flow merely because visible smoke reduces.
- Monitor boundaries, temperature, alarms and signs of re-ignition from outside the space.
- Prepare for loss of propulsion, generation or steering support caused by shutdown.
- Treat re-entry as a separate risk assessment involving atmosphere, heat, visibility and protective equipment.

CRITICAL WARNING

Opening the protected space too soon may admit oxygen, release the extinguishing agent and allow the fire to re-establish. The correct hold time and re-entry process are system- and casualty-specific.

Automatic release

Automatic release can act quickly in an unattended machinery space, but owners should understand the warning, shutdown, override and reset arrangements. An automatic system should not create an unrecognised hazard to a person who may be inside the protected space.

FIRST RESPONSE

Portable equipment and different fire hazards

Portable extinguishers can control a small fire in its early stage, but only when the correct agent is available, the user has a clear escape route and conditions remain tenable.

Hazard	Response consideration	Important limitation
Ordinary solid materials	Cooling and penetration may be needed to prevent deep-seated re-ignition.	Surface knockdown does not prove that hidden material is no longer burning.
Flammable liquids or fuel spray	Stop the fuel source where safe and use an agent approved for the hazard.	Re-ignition is likely while hot surfaces and continued leakage remain.
Energised electrical equipment	Isolate electrical power safely and use equipment suitable for the live-electrical risk.	Isolation does not remove stored energy, heat or fire in surrounding materials.
Cooking oils and fats	Use the dedicated appliance shutdown and an approved cooking-fire system or extinguisher.	Water or an unsuitable agent can spread burning oil and seriously injure the operator.
Battery systems	Raise the alarm, isolate associated charging where safe and follow chemistry-specific emergency guidance.	Thermal runaway, toxic gases, re-ignition, high voltage or explosive gas may continue after external flame is suppressed.

When not to fight the fire

- The fire is growing, producing dense smoke or affecting more than the item of origin.
- There is no secure escape route behind the person using the extinguisher.
- Fuel, gas or electrical energy cannot be controlled.
- The correct agent is not available or the hazard is uncertain.
- The crew is not trained, protected or physically able to make a safe attempt.

LIFE SAFETY FIRST	An extinguisher is not a reason to delay raising the alarm, closing the space or preparing to abandon. A safe withdrawal is a successful decision when conditions are deteriorating.
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FAILURE AWARENESS

Common weaknesses and warning signs

Fire systems often degrade quietly. Missing service evidence, isolated zones, weak backup batteries or obstructed nozzles may not become obvious until an alarm or discharge is needed.

Finding or symptom	Possible cause	Why it matters
Recurring detector fault or false alarm	Contamination, poor location, damaged wiring, ageing device or unsuitable detector type.	Crew may ignore a real alarm or leave the zone isolated.
Panel shows fault or isolation	Power failure, open circuit, disabled device, discharged backup battery or maintenance left incomplete.	Part of the yacht may have no effective warning.
Cylinder pressure or weight outside limits	Leakage, temperature effect, discharge, overdue service or incorrect indication.	The system may not deliver the designed agent quantity.
Release control damaged or inaccessible	Corrosion, seized cable, missing seal, poor labelling or blocked access.	Manual discharge may be delayed or impossible.
Nozzles or pipework altered	Refit work, paint, obstruction, damage or unrecorded modification.	Agent distribution may no longer match the protected space.
Ventilation or fuel shutdown fails	Seized damper, failed actuator, wiring fault, broken cable or incorrect interlock.	Air and fuel can sustain the fire or allow agent to escape.
Alarm cannot be heard in cabins	Insufficient sounder coverage, closed doors, failed device or machinery noise.	Sleeping or off-watch crew may not receive timely warning.

DO NOT NORMALISE IT

A detector that is always isolated, an alarm that regularly sounds without explanation or a cylinder with unclear service status is a reduction in protection, not an inconvenience to work around.

After refit or machinery changes

Review detector coverage, cable routes, nozzles, protected volume, ventilation closures, shutdown interfaces and labels. A fire system can remain physically present while no longer matching the space it was designed to protect.

MAINTENANCE AND DRILLS

Proving that protection is available

Owner checks improve visibility, while specialist servicing confirms agent quantity, release integrity, detector performance and compliance with the installed system's requirements.

Area	Owner and service focus
Detection	Cleanliness, damage, zone indication, approved functional testing, device life and changes to airflow or coverage.
Panel and alarms	Normal/fault status, primary and backup power, sounder coverage, remote indications and clear labels.
Fixed system	Cylinder pressure/weight where applicable, service dates, seals, release controls, pipework, nozzles and discharge indication.
Shutdowns and closures	Fuel shut-offs, engine/generator stops, fans, dampers, hatches and doors operate through the intended procedure.
Portable equipment	Correct location, hazard suitability, accessibility, security, service status and crew familiarity.
Documentation	Current drawings, system manual, agent safety information, service certificates, defect log and emergency procedure.

Crew familiarisation and drills

- Walk every crew member through alarms, escape routes, muster and communications.
- Identify who can stop engines, generators, fuel pumps and ventilation from outside the affected space.
- Practise locating release controls without operating or disturbing the live system.
- Discuss the consequences of discharge, including loss of propulsion or electrical power.
- Rehearse boundary monitoring, abandon-yacht preparation and casualty communications.

**NO ACCIDENTAL
DISCHARGE**

Drills must not compromise seals, safety pins, release cables or cylinders. Testing of live release mechanisms and agent quantity belongs within the approved service procedure.

Work to refer

Cylinder servicing, pressure testing, agent replacement, release adjustment, detector replacement, protected-volume calculation, nozzle modification and control-system configuration should be referred to competent fire-system professionals.

OFFSHORE READINESS

Emergency response and owner-familiarisation checklist

A developing fire can quickly remove propulsion, generation, communications and safe access. Early alarm, decisive isolation and timely external communication preserve options.



Questions before departure

- Can every crew member recognise the general fire alarm and identify the muster point?
- Which spaces have automatic detection, and which depend on crew observation?
- What machinery, fuel and ventilation stop automatically when the fixed system releases?
- Can those same services be shut down manually from outside the protected space?
- What propulsion, steering, bilge and communications capability remains after an engine-room discharge?
- Where are the manual release, portable extinguishers, fire blankets and emergency communications?
- At what point will the crew transmit urgency or distress and prepare to abandon?

Quick readiness check

	Readiness statement
	Detection zones, alarm meanings and fault indications are understood.
	Alarms are audible or visible in operating, accommodation and sleeping areas.
	Fixed-system type, protected space, release controls and service status are documented.
	Fuel, machinery and ventilation shutdowns operate through the intended procedure.
	Openings and dampers needed to contain the agent can be closed.
	Portable equipment matches the onboard hazards and remains accessible.
	More than one person knows the alarm, muster, isolation and release actions.
	A post-discharge, re-entry and reduced-capability plan has been considered.

KEY TAKEAWAY

A dependable fire-protection arrangement is demonstrated by early warning, clear alarms, maintained suppression, effective shutdowns, a containable protected space and a crew prepared to escape and act without delay.

Standards and guidance to consult

Consult the current ISO 9094, the installed system and agent manufacturers' instructions, and applicable flag-state, coding, class, insurance and local requirements. Larger or commercial yachts may also be subject to IMO FSS Code provisions.

Understanding Yacht Systems

Practical guides for owners, buyers
and offshore cruising crews.

AMTG-006

Understanding Fire Detection and Suppression Systems

RELATED GUIDES

AMTG-031 Understanding Fire Pumps and Fire Mains

AMTG-032 Understanding Emergency Shutdown Systems

AMTG-033 Understanding Fixed and Portable Firefighting Equipment

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