

RECREATIONAL BOATING SAFETY AT TOP OF MOST WANTED LIST

We have all been patting ourselves on the backs – and deservedly so – because boating fatalities have declined in recent years – and NSBC and other boating safety organizations can take credit. However, the battle to end boating accidents is not over – not by a long shot – and the National Transportation Safety Board agrees. The NTSB issued its annual list of *Most Wanted Transportation Safety Improvements* and recreational boating safety is still on the list.

According to the NTSB report issued last month, more than 80 percent of recreational boat operators involved in fatal boating accidents have not taken any type of boating education course. At least 37 percent of the operators involved in fatal accidents were known to have, or were presumed to have consumed alcohol before their accidents. And, in a not surprising finding, the NTSB concluded that 85 percent of those who drowned in a boating accident, for whom information was available, were not wearing personal flotation devices. The NTSB also found of concern that 84 percent of the personal watercraft (PWC) operators received no boating instruction, and operators of rented PWC had even less PWC experience and training. Most PWC operators, who drown, according to the Safety Board, were not wearing a PFD.

Since 1993, the NTSB has issued a series of recommendations focused at states enacting legislation on boating safety education, mandatory wear of PFDs by children, better chemical testing of operators involved in accidents, and required safety instruction for persons who rent PWCs. This year, the NTSB complimented those states having enacted legislation since the 1993 recommendations. Mandatory boating education has passed in 15 states (AR, CO, CT, DE, FL, KS, MD, MS, NH, NJ, OH, OR, TX, VT, WV); operator licenses are required in two states (AL and UT); and 39 states have adopted a requirement for mandatory wear of PFDs for children. In the area of Boating While Intoxicated, 49 states have established a new BAC definition; 45 states require toxicological testing of fatalities; and 40 states now require a chemical test if a boater is suspected of being impaired. In the PWC arena, safety instruction at rental operations is now mandatory in 28 states.

This is a record that boating safety experts can be proud of. But, the slate remains to be completed. The NTSB calls on 25 states and the District of Columbia to require education of boat operators; 11 states and DC to require PFD use by children on recreational boats; 10 states to strengthen their BWI laws; and 26 states and DC to require safety instruction at personal watercraft rental operations.

Until the gap is closed and all states have passed these important safety measures, we can not rest on our record of success but have to continue to wage the battle for safe boating – on the waterfront and in state legislatures.

OFFICE OF BOATING SAFETY, DEFINED

Editors Note: This is the first in a series of articles-check future issues for the continuation.

Throughout my travels, I am periodically asked, “Would you explain what the Office of Boating Safety (G-OPB) is all about?” In this and future articles, I will attempt to provide a general overview. We are one of seven operational programs within the Operations Policy (G-OP) Directorate, which provide many of the direct services used by all our maritime customers. Beside Recreational Boating Safety, these include Search and Rescue response, all types of Aids to Navigation, general, drug, migrant and fisheries Law Enforcement, national and international Bridge Administration, Defense Operations, and Polar and Domestic Ice operations. As you might suspect, the Recreational Boating Safety program is a major part of the Department of Transportation’s strategy to improve transportation safety, since it targets the second leading cause of transportation related fatalities after highways.

The U.S. Coast Guard, in its role as the designated National Recreational Boating Safety Coordinator, is by necessity a leader in improving the boating experience of the maritime public. We work regularly in partnership with all stakeholders who use our waterways to reach consensus solutions, which in turn support our recreational boating safety mission. This mission is to minimize the loss of life, personal injury, property damage and environmental impact associated with the use of recreational boats, through preventive means, in order to maximize safe use and enjoyment of U.S. Waterways by the public.

To help us focus our efforts and resources better, the Coast Guard Boating Safety Program has four basic goals. They are:

1. **To improve the demonstrated knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors of boaters.**
2. **To improve the safety of boats and their associated equipment**
3. **To improve the physical and operational boating environment**
4. **To improve intermodal and interagency cooperation, coordination, and assistance.**

These four goals are supported by several major program elements which include: Education and Enforcement, improving Accident Reporting and data collection, National Outreach, emphasis on Lifejacket Wear, elimination of Boating Under the Influence, oversight of Personal Watercraft issues, enhanced Partnerships with key players and a commitment to Responsible Stewardship in the public interest. In this issue of the *AnchorLine*, we will expound on the first two program areas listed above. Others areas will be discussed in future issues.

EDUCATION AND ENFORCEMENT

We believe Education is the key to prevention and Enforcement is the key to deterrence. Statistics show that 85% of boating fatalities occur on boats where the operator had no boating safety education. And while the trend line for fatalities is declining, the numbers of accidents and injuries continue to rise. More boaters on the water and the unfamiliarity of operators with the environment are key variables.

It is not surprising that 85% of all accidents are attributable to operator-controlled factors. Excessive speed, inattention to operation, failure to follow required navigation rules and practices, and lack of knowledge about the boat and the boating environment were the major factors in most accidents.

Many states are working to increase the number of persons required to have completed a boating safety education course. We support this initiative. However, even with this effort to make boaters smarter, increased state patrolling of the waterways of America to remove violators and deter those who won’t operate safely will be critical to making boating safer.

ACCIDENT REPORTING

The capture of boating incident information on an accident report is vital to correctly addressing any safety hazards related to boating. This data is critical if we are to responsibly manage the recreational boating safety program and address the real safety issues on behalf of the American public. The states and the Coast Guard need input from people involved in accidents. If you are in an accident on the water, report it to your state officials or the Coast Guard.

Partnerships between insurance companies, hospitals, and law enforcement are useful in increasing awareness and compliance with reporting requirements. The Coast Guard has initiated a project to increase reporting awareness through targeted campaigns at emergency departments and hospital treatment facilities. We will also be working to create an Internet based reporting system to facilitate operator reporting of accidents.

(to be continued next issue)