

# PA STATE LEGAL REQUIREMENTS TEACHING OUTLINE



## 1. State boating waters

- 83,261 miles of rivers and streams, 76 natural lakes that provides 5,266 acres of flat-water.
- 2,300 constructed impoundments provide another 200,000 acres of boatable waters.
- Lake Erie has 63 miles of shoreline and 735 square miles of waters within Pennsylvania's boundaries.
- Delaware River provides 56 miles of tidal waters within Pennsylvania giving access to the Atlantic Ocean.

## 2. Pennsylvania state boating statistics

- In 1982 less than 200,000, 2010 approximately 347,000 boats registered. Approximately ½ of registered motorboats are 16 feet or less in length; most boats are small and trailerable.
- Estimated 300,000 unregistered unpowered boats.

## 3. Pennsylvania boating regulatory agency responsibilities

- Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, P.O. Box 67000, Harrisburg, PA 17106-7000, Phone (717) 705-7833, toll-free course line 1-888-PAFISH-1; E-mail Boating Education: [ra-be@pa.gov](mailto:ra-be@pa.gov); website: [www.fishandboat.com](http://www.fishandboat.com)
- Established in 1866. Funded by Pennsylvania's boaters and fishermen through separate boat and fish funds (boat registration fees and fishing license revenues). Responsible for promoting, regulating, and enforcing fishing and boating regulations in Pennsylvania.
- PA Fish and Boat Commission often confused with the PA Game Commission, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Bureau of State Parks or the Bureau of Forestry; these agencies work together.

## 4. Registration requirements

- All motorboats operated on Pennsylvania waters must be registered. Expires on March 31.
- Two year fee for boats less than 16 ft. is \$26; 16 ft. to less than 20 ft. is \$39, 20 ft. or over is \$52. Voluntary registration unpowered boats - \$18. Manufacturers and dealers \$15 per year.
- Color coded validation decals must be displayed within 6 inches of the boat number on the same level (before or following the number). These decals are numbered and correspond with the number printed on the registration card.
- All boats (powered or unpowered) using PFBC lakes or accesses must be registered (currently registered out-of-state boats may use PFBC accesses or lakes) or display a launch permit decal. The Commission does NOT recognize launch permits from other states. Boats with unpowered boat registrations may NOT be equipped with gasoline or electric motors or any other mechanical propulsion and be operated on Pennsylvania waterways.
- Launch permits must be displayed on either side of an unpowered boat amidships (in the middle of the boat) just below the gunwale.
- Registered boats must be numbered with the exception of: kayaks, sculls, sailboards and documented vessels (must display registration decal only).
- Documented vessels (yachts) used for recreational purposes must be registered.

## 5. Boat titling

- A certificate of title is a legal document proving ownership.
- All motorboats, model year 1997 or newer, 14 feet or larger, or powered by inboard motors (including personal water craft) must be titled.
- All other boats, regardless of the length, power source or year of the boat, may also be titled, BUT IT IS NOT MANDATORY TO DO SO.
- Fee for issuance of title is \$15; \$5 fee for duplicate title, additional encumbrance fee of \$5 if there is a lien against boat. Advantages to titling; it assures the buyer of a boat that seller has clear ownership of boat offered for sale, it may also make it easier to secure a loan or deter boat theft.

## **6. Capacity plates**

- Any monohull boat less than 20 feet in length designed to carry two or more persons, propelled by machinery or oars, operated on PA waters must display a capacity plate.

## **7. Personal Flotation Devices (PFDs)**

- All boats must have one wearable life jacket for each person onboard.
- Wearable types must be "readily accessible" - easily reached and ready to wear.
- Type IV (throwables) must be "immediately available", within reaching distance.
- Must be appropriate size for the person intended.
- All water skiers, personal watercraft users, sailboarders, and anyone being towed behind vessels must wear a PFD. Inflatable PFDs are not acceptable to meet this requirement.
- Children 12 years of age and younger must wear an approved WEARABLE PFD while underway on any boat 20 feet or less in length and all canoes and kayaks.
- Pittsburgh District Army Corps of Engineers (only) require PFDs to be worn by everyone in boats under 16 feet and all canoes.
- Effective November 1, 2012, a person shall wear a Coast Guard approved personal flotation device (PFD or life jacket) during the cold weather months from November 1st through April 30th while underway or at anchor on boats less than 16 feet in length or any canoe or kayak.

## **8. Visual Distress Signals (VDS) PA requirement is for Lake Erie only.**

## **9. Fire extinguishers**

- Fire extinguishers must be installed, maintained and fully charged.
- Must be immediately available within arms reach of the operator or passengers. Must be mounted in an accessible area away from the fuel source.

## **10. Alcohol**

- Unlawful to operate or be in physical control of a watercraft in or through PA waters while under the influence of alcohol or a controlled substance to a degree that renders a person incapable of safe operation of the watercraft.
- A PFBC WCO has the authority to stop and perform sobriety tests on an operator if reasonable suspicion exists, and arrest the operator for being under the influence.
- A blood alcohol content of .08 percent or more is considered to be over the legal limit (0.02% b.a.c. for minors). Penalties include loss of boating privileges, significant fines and imprisonment.

## **11. Boat Operation**

- Watercraft may not be operated in a reckless, negligent, or dangerous manner.
- Boats must be operated at a rate of speed that will not endanger the life or property of any person.
- Boats must maintain a slow no wake speed when operated within 100 feet of the shoreline, floats, docks, launching ramps, swimmers or downed skiers, anchored, moored or drifting boats, or areas marked with "Slow No Wake" buoys.
- Operation of a motorboat less than 20 ft. in length at greater than slow-no wake is illegal while a person is standing on/in the boat.
- It is unlawful to operate a motorboat not equipped with railings or other safeguards at greater than slow no wake speed while a person is riding on bow decking, gunwales, transom, or motor cover (some exceptions, i.e., seat built into motor cover).
- It is unlawful to cause a boat to become airborne or completely leave the water while crossing the wake of another boat when within 100 feet of the boat creating the wake.
- It is unlawful to weave through congested traffic.
- Following too close to another boat, including PWC, is unlawful. Following too close shall be construed as operating in excess of slow no wake speed within 100 feet to the rear or 50 feet to the side of another boat that is underway, unless the boats are operating in a narrow channel, in which case the boats may operate at the speed and flow of other boat traffic. Operating within 100 feet of a waterskier being towed by another boat is unlawful.

- Operating a pontoon boat while a person is riding outside the passenger-carrying area is unlawful.
- Operating a motorboat with anyone sitting, riding or hanging on a swim platform or swim ladder attached to the boat.

#### **12. Minimum age for operation of motorboats (other than personal watercraft)**

- A person 11 years of age or younger may not operate a boat propelled by a motor greater than 25 horsepower.
- A person born on or after January 1, 1982, shall not operate, on the waters of this Commonwealth, a motorboat greater than 25 horsepower without first obtaining a certificate of boating safety education.

#### **13. Personal Watercraft (PWC)**

- No one may operate a PWC without having in his or her possession a boating safety education certificate.
- Operators of PWC must obey the same rules as other motorboats.
- Everyone on board must wear a PFD.
- Illegal to rent to or for the use by a person under 16 years of age or younger.
- Illegal to operate from sunset to sunrise.
- When supplied with boat, safety lanyard for the kill switch must be attached to the body, clothing, PFD.
- Illegal to tow a water skier behind a boat with a capacity of two people or less and to tow more than one skier.
- Fire extinguishers, sound producing device, numbers and registration (carry on board) required.
- Minimum age for operation of PWC
  - No one 11 years of age or younger may operate a PWC (must be at least 12 years old).
  - It is illegal for anyone 12 through 15 years of age to operate a PWC with any passengers onboard 15 years of age or younger. (This differs from regulation for other motorboats.)

#### **14. Water Skiing**

- A competent observer in addition to the operator is required on all watercraft having in tow a person on water skis, aquaplane, kite skis, or similar device. A competent observer has the ability to assess when a skier is in trouble, knows and understands the water skiing hand signals, and is capable of helping a skier.
- Ski tow ropes may not exceed 80 feet.
- Skiing is prohibited between the hours of sunset and sunrise.

#### **15. Watercraft Noise Control**

- The level of emitting noise by a watercraft is limited in PA to a maximum of 82 decibels measured at a distance of 50 feet from the vessel. The PFBC has the authority to stop and test boats for noise emission. All boats equipped with internal combustion motors must be equipped with an efficient muffling system or device.

#### **16. Anchor Lights**

- Boats (powered or unpowered) less than 7 meters (about 23 feet) are required to display an all-around anchor light when anchored in or near a channel, when in an anchorage not designated as a special anchorage area, or where other vessels normally navigate. This includes all boatable Commonwealth waters.

#### **17. Docking Lights**

- It is illegal to use docking lights, while underway, except when docking and the boat is traveling at slow, no wake speed and is within 100 feet of approaching a dock, a mooring buoy or the shoreline. A docking light is a flood or spotlight type of light permanently installed or permanently mounted on a motorboat that is used to illuminate a boat's forward course of travel.

#### **18. Sound-Producing Devices**

- Motorboats 12 meters (39.4 feet) or more in length shall carry sound producing devices as prescribed by the Inland Navigation Rules Act of 1980.
- Motorboats less than 12 meters in length shall carry some mechanical means of making a sound signal. This

device may be hand, mouth or power operated. An athletic coach's whistle is an acceptable sound-producing device for small motorboats.

- Unpowered boat operators are required to carry a device capable of sounding a prolonged blast for 4-6 seconds that can be heard by another boat operator in time to avoid a collision. An athletic coach's whistle is an acceptable sound producing device for unpowered boats.
- It is unlawful to use a sound producing device on the water under any circumstance except a situation in which assistance is needed because of immediate or potential danger to the persons onboard or it is necessary to attract the attention of another

#### **19. Accident Reporting**

- The operator of any boat involved in a boating accident is required to stop, render assistance, and offer identification if doing so would not endanger their own boat or passengers.
- If the accident results in a death or disappearance, authorities must be notified immediately, followed by a boating accident report within 48 hours.
- If the accident results in an injury that requires treatment beyond first aid, a Boating Accident Report must be submitted within 48 hours.
- If the accident results in damage to the boat or other property exceeding \$2,000 or there is total loss of a boat, a Boating Accident Report must be submitted within 10 days.
- In Pennsylvania, boating accidents must be reported to the Fish & Boat Commission. The form for reporting accidents is available online at the Commission's web site.

#### **20. Restrictions on Certain State Waters**

- Many Commonwealth waters have special regulations such as horsepower limitations, and regulated boating areas such as slow-no-wake zones, ski areas, and speed limits. Boaters should check ahead to avoid an unpleasant surprise.

**PA FISH AND BOAT COMMISSION  
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