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A DECADE OF CHANGE

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Last year marked a decade of Pennsylvania’s cold water life jacket wear requirement. The regulation went into effect January 1, 2012, and requires everyone onboard boats less than 16 feet long and all canoes, kayaks, and paddleboards to wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket while underway or at anchor from November 1 to April 30.

Many people consider the late fall through early spring season as the “off” time of year for boating. In fact, cooler air and water temperatures drive many boaters off the water shortly after Labor Day. Fewer boaters on the water generally means a lower number of boating incidents during this timeframe. However, a closer look at the data from 2002 to 2011 reveals the percentage of deadly recreational boating incidents in these colder months was disproportionately higher than the rest of the year. And, most of the incidents occurred in small, unstable boats—mostly less than 16 feet long—and canoes and kayaks. This data analysis caused the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission to consider a strategic approach to saving lives.

Cold water shock was a major factor in nearly all fatal incidents. Cold water shock causes an involuntary gasp (often resulting in the aspiration of water), hyperventilation, breathlessness, and a reduced ability to control breathing and swim. Wearing a life jacket greatly increases a person’s chance for survival in cold water. Most importantly, a life jacket keeps

a person’s head above water. Depending on its design, a life jacket may provide insulation against frigid water and air. The added buoyancy (or lift) of a life jacket allows a person to preserve precious energy to focus on next steps for survival rather than frantically treading water. With fewer boaters on the water in the cooler months, a life jacket helps extend the amount of time for a person to be rescued before they become exhausted or hypothermic.

With these benefits in mind, the Commission crafted the cold water life jacket wear requirement to help save boaters’ lives. Now, 10 years since the requirement went into effect, the Commission has sufficient data to analyze its impact. Prior to the regulation, the percent of boating incidents resulting in deaths from November 1 to April 30 averaged 58%. While the number of incidents increased in the following 10 years after the regulation was enacted, the average of the incidents resulting in deaths dropped to 39%. The cold water life jacket wear requirement saves lives!

Every year, more lives could be saved if boaters would wear life jackets. Boating incidents can happen to anyone and in all types of water conditions. Wearing a life jacket at all times is the number one action boaters can take to prevent drowning. ☐

Boating regulations:



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The number of boating incidents (blue line) peaks during the height of the boating season when more boaters are on the water. However, the percent of incidents resulting in deaths (orange bars) is generally highest from November to April due to the effects of cold water. Once the cold water life jacket wear requirement was enacted, the orange bars were cut nearly in half, indicating the percent of accidents resulting in deaths decreased.

Source: United States Coast Guard Recreational Boating Accident Report Database

