

BOAT

Pennsylvania



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Viewpoint



Feeling the Pinch



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We are all acutely aware of the recent attempt by the Congress to pass a deficit reduction bill. The bill, which passed in late October, has many far-reaching effects. We will all feel the pinch in the coming years as new taxes and user fees kick in. As boaters we are also going to feel the pinch in more ways than one.

Most people are aware that the new Deficit Reduction Act included a surcharge of 10 percent on the value of boats costing more than \$100,000. This levy doesn't affect too many Pennsylvania boaters because there are very few boats of this class used in Pennsylvania. On the other hand, Pennsylvania does have manufacturers and dealers of boats of this class, and the effect on this industry is as yet unknown.

The tax on gasoline is to go up a nickel a gallon. When the increased pump prices that we have been experiencing lately are considered, this may not seem like much. But it could be important to the boater and angler. Many of you know that the federal tax collected on gasoline used in motorboats goes toward the funding of the Aquatic Resources Trust Fund. This is the federal program that funnels federal taxes collected from boaters and anglers back into programs that directly benefit boaters and anglers. Some \$90 million of federal tax on fuel already goes into this fund.

Even though increased prices will lower consumption next year, this increase will still result in increased collections of about \$50 million. We are hopeful that the final budget bill will leave this money in the fund and not divert it for deficit reduction.

The bill also includes another more insidious tax that affects all boaters. Tucked into the bill is a provision imposing a user fee on all recreational boats. This tax will probably apply only on federally navigable waters, but this includes a large portion of Pennsylvania including the Delaware River, the "Three Rivers" in western Pennsylvania, the Susquehanna River, Lake Erie and perhaps even U.S. Army Corps of Engineers impoundments.

The exact form of this tax is not known yet. Nor are the collection and enforcement provisions known. What we do know is that beginning January 1, 1991, boaters will have to cough up the following annual fees:

- boats over 16 feet but less than 20 feet - \$ 25
- boats at least 20 feet but less than 27 feet - \$ 35
- boats at least 27 feet but less than 40 feet - \$ 50
- boats at least 40 feet - \$100

These fees will probably raise some \$130 million for the federal treasury. But what does the boater get for these fees? The legislation specifically states that "collection of these charges or fees does not constitute an express or implied promise by the United States to perform any service or activity in a certain manner or to provide any service at a particular time or place." In other words, boaters will pay but get nothing for their money.

The Fish Commission is gravely concerned over this issue. For years the Commission has provided the law enforcement, the boating safety education and the facilities. To pay for these services boaters have been charged a nominal \$4 or \$6 to register their boats. Registration fees have been kept low for 28 years through sound management. Unfortunately, times have caught up with us and we must request an increase in fees from the Pennsylvania Legislature.

What effect these federal fees will have on our attempts to fund our programs adequately is not known. It certainly cannot have a positive effect and could likely deal a disastrous blow to our state programs.

The number of new boats sold in Pennsylvania last year declined by 20 percent from the year before. This trend continues a slide that started a few years ago.

The increased cost of gasoline and the fuels tax also make boating a more expensive sport. Pennsylvania boaters spent over \$80 million on boats and boating equipment during 1990. They spent over \$3 billion for repairs, food, gasoline, travel, supplies and related needs to enjoy their sport. Not only is boating fun, but it is an important component to the economy.

In all, the proposed new taxes on boating will raise over \$200 million. But boating programs are guaranteed to see only about \$5 million of these funds.

I hope that the Congress recognizes the full effect of its deeds and acts before it is too late to rectify the wrong dealt to the nation's boaters.

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The covers

This issue's front cover, photographed by Art Michaels, shows Bureau of Boating staffer Cheryl Kimerline Hornung enjoying a ride on a personal watercraft in the Susquehanna River, York County. This winter you can plan to enjoy your boating next season more than ever by reading the stories on pages 4, 14, 20 and 28.

This issue's back cover was photographed by Richard Hamilton Smith.