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Viewpoint

The New PFD Rules



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In the previous issue, you read an article by Magazines and Publications Section Chief Art Michaels explaining some recent changes in personal flotation device regulations. He also gave 10 important tips to follow in choosing the right PFD. I hope you enjoyed his article and put his suggestions to good work.

Choosing the right PFD is very important. It could be the most important piece of equipment that you ever buy for your boat. PFDs used to be called "life jackets" and "lifesaving devices." And for good reason. A good PFD worn at the right time has saved many lives. We know how many have died in boating accidents, but we do not know how many lives may have been saved as a result of proper use of PFDs. From stories I've heard, the number could be quite large.

Art told you about a recent change in the federal regulation concerning the use of the traditional Type IV PFD. After May 1, 1995, this type of PFD will no longer be acceptable as a primary lifesaving device. After that date, all boats will have to carry wearable devices.

This classification of PFD is known to most of us as the seat cushion. Over the years since its approval it has served small-boat owners well. It has kept our bottoms warm, dry and comfortable. It has been ready for use when needed and has most likely saved a few lives in its time. But there are drawbacks to the cushion. First, it is not always available in an unexpected fall from the boat. The cushion stays in the boat while the operator floats down the lake. The device often does not provide a sufficient amount of flotation for larger individuals. Some people, especially in cold water, could not hold on to the devices long enough for help to arrive. After several seasons of use, it is often squashed, torn and not functional, leading to unwanted citations for unserviceable PFDs. What is most important, they could not be worn even when the boater knew the conditions were bad enough that a wearable device would have made sense and would have made him feel much more safe and secure.

It was only after much debate over the merits of a readily available throwable device versus the benefits of having all boats equipped with wearable devices that the Coast Guard adopted these new regulations. In Pennsylvania, most boating deaths occur in boats less than 16 feet in length.

Even though there is no absolute way to know, we think that many of these tragic deaths could have been averted had the operator had the choice of putting on a Type III wearable device. The new regulation should result in fewer of these types of deaths.

There are other reasons for our support of the new regulations. In recent years, we have been faced with increasing calls for stricter regulations concerning the wearing of PFDs. The Corps of Engineers in the Pittsburgh District issued a decree that all persons on board boats less than 16 feet wear a PFD at all times. We believe that this is unduly restrictive. There are times during the hot summer months when wearing a PFD would be unbearable. We agree that all boaters should wear a PFD when the weather and water conditions warrant such use. We also believe that there are circumstances in which a requirement to wear a PFD is not necessary or at least should not be mandated by government. The new requirement that boats carry a wearable device for each person on board should encourage boaters to wear a PFD when needed and thus lessen the call for more restrictive requirements. Common sense should apply and if given the option to wear or not to wear, we believe that boaters will choose to wear.

The Coast Guard is also moving ahead with a rulemaking project that will, for the first time, approve the use of fully inflatable PFDs. These PFDs will be very low-profile. The types I have seen so far are made in the form of suspenders and pouches worn on the waist. Both types, when inflated, look and work like a Type II horseshollar. They are very effective but are not at all uncomfortable when stowed. Other devices in development look like windbreakers and thus serve two purposes. The Coast Guard hopes to have final rulemaking completed by year's end. The first approved devices should be on the market in early 1995. Look for more information on inflatable PFDs in future issues of *Boat PA*.

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The cover

This issue's front and back covers were photographed on the Youghiogheny River, southwest Pennsylvania, by Kevin O'Brien. You might routinely store your boat for the winter each autumn. Fact is, fall is a great time to be on the water because most other boaters have called it a season. Now you can find plenty of trailer parking at once-crowded accesses. Now you can cruise, play or fish in waters that were crammed with boaters. Check out Mike Bleech's boating suggestions for the Allegheny Highlands of northcentral PA, and Jeff Knapp's overview of the Three Rivers Pool at Pittsburgh. While you're at it, read the operating suggestions for powerboaters in Cheryl Hornung's article on page 22, and in Jonathan Angharad's article on page 24. Paddlers will surely gain a lot from Cliff Jacobson's explanation on how to overcome common paddling hazards, on page 8. And for a walk into the pages of Pennsylvania's boating past, see page 14.

