



U. S. COAST GUARD

INFORMATION SHEET



PERSONAL WATERCRAFT

ISSUE: An upward trend in the number of personal watercraft (PWC) in accidents involving children and adolescents when compared to other types of recreational vessels.

BACKGROUND: Since their introduction in the mid 1970's, PWC continue to enjoy a steady upward trend in use and popularity, especially among younger boaters. While the overall number of PWC in accidents and resulting injuries have shown a remarkable downward trend since 1996, children and adolescents are injured with greater frequency riding PWC when compared to other types of recreational vessels. In one year, 112 children under the age of 12 were injured on PWC. Lack of experience and excessive speed caused 60% of the accidents when the operator was less than 12 years of age. Twenty percent of these were operators in violation of State laws and manufacturers' recommendations. Additionally, 80% of these operators did not have formal training, and most PWC accidents occur in the first 20 hours of operation. Current estimates show over 1.48 million PWC are in use with an annual rider-ship of over twenty million Americans.

DISCUSSION: States have assumed the greater responsibility for regulating PWC operation. Currently, the majority of the States and Territories have adopted laws specifically aimed at PWC operation and that address one or more of the following: mandatory lifejacket wear, minimum operator age, prohibition of night operation, and prohibition of unsafe operation such as wake jumping within 100 feet of the vessel creating the wake, weaving through congested traffic, excessive speed, and operation too close to another vessel. PWC are recreational vessels as defined in 46 U.S.C. § 2101 and must command the same respect as any other vessel by its operator and fellow boaters. The Coast Guard worked with the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) in the development of a Model Act for Personal Watercraft. The Personal Watercraft Industry Association (PWIA) has a similar model act and fully supports passage of such legislation. The industry has been sensitive to the negative perceptions regarding their product and has been very active in promoting PWC operator legislation, education and safety awareness.

A personal watercraft is a vessel and the operator must obey the Navigation Rules. Similarly, they retain all the privileges and responsibilities that accrue to other power driven vessels on the water. The Coast Guard strongly advocates basic boating safety instruction and education, especially for children, before riding a PWC. Supervising adults should be aware of all manufacturers' recommendations and local laws concerning PWC use by children. The Coast Guard further recommends that rental businesses provide basic boating safety instruction and education on the safe and prudent operation of the PWC or require proof of prior education before renting to anyone, and require renters to wear a personal flotation device (lifejacket).

APPROVED: _____

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