

STATE OF WISCONSIN
State-Specific Boating Safety Requirements

SL 1. Law Enforcement Authority

The Bureau of Law Enforcement of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has the responsibility to enforce boating laws and regulations. This gives them the authority to stop any boat on Wisconsin waters and ticket violators of boating regulations and laws. The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) also has enforcement authority on all federally controlled waters.

SL 2. Age Restrictions

In Wisconsin, no one under the age of 10 may operate a motorboat. The following may operate a motorboat in the state:

- Children ages 10 and 11 if accompanied on the boat by a parent or guardian, or a person at least 18 years old designated by a parent or guardian.
- Children ages 12 to 15 if accompanied on the boat by a parent or guardian, or a person at least 18 years old designated by a parent or guardian, or if in possession of a boating safety course completion certificate issued by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources or another State.
- Anyone 16 years of age and older.

There are no age requirements for operating a boat not equipped with a motor.

SL 3. Boater Safety Education Requirements

The Wisconsin legislature has recently passed a mandatory Boating Education bill. This bill requires anyone born on or after January 1, 1989, and at least 16 years of age to have a boating safety education certificate to operate a motorboat on Wisconsin's waterways. Children between the ages of 12 to 15 must have a boating safety course completion certificate issued by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources or another State to operate a Personal Watercraft (PWC). Adult supervision is not a substitute for a certificate.

SL 4. Vessel Registration

To operate on Wisconsin waters, boats must be registered and have a valid certificate of number issued by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Federally documented boats must be registered in the State of Wisconsin unless exempt. The following are exemption:

- Sailboats 12 feet and under without a motor.
- Manually propelled boats not equipped with a motor or sail.
- Any boat with a valid certificate from another state or federal government that has been in Wisconsin not more than 60 consecutive days or if Wisconsin is not the state of principal use.
- Licensed, documented fishing vessels.
- Sailboards.
- A boat present in Wisconsin is exempt from registration for a period of 10 days for the express purpose of competing in a race sanctioned by a governmental subdivision.

Applications for boat registration and/or titling must be submitted to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Forms are available at Department of Natural Resources Service Centers, marinas, and county clerks' offices. A boat owner who changes residence must notify the Department of Natural Resources within 15 days.

Transfer of boat ownership of a boat terminates the certificate of number and title. Upon receipt of the required fee and application, the Department of Natural Resources will issue a new certificate of number and/or title. The number and title will remain with the boat unless

expired. The buyer must apply on forms furnished by the Department of Natural Resources within 10 days and prior to operation. The previous owner's certificate and title must accompany the application.

Fees are assessed for the issuance of a certificate of number and/or title by the new owner upon the transfer of ownership of a boat numbered in Wisconsin. The certificate is effective for the remainder of the numbering period for which the previous certificate was issued. After application, a person may operate a boat when a copy of the application is onboard.

Transferring the number designated by the Department of Natural Resources from one boat to another is prohibited.

SL 5. Maximum Loading and Horsepower

To review federal regulations, refer to the section on Capacity Plates included in Chapter 1 of this course.

The following information was approved by NASBLA and is included in Chapter 1 of the Boater101 Course:

Capacity Plates

It is required for all mono-hull boats under 20 feet built on or after November 1, 1972 to have a capacity plate approved by the USCG. In addition some manufacturers voluntarily install capacity plates on boats larger than 20 feet. This plate must be visible from the operator's station. The capacity plate lists a safe motor size, the maximum number of persons to be carried onboard, and the total weight the boat can carry including persons, motor, and gear. When operating your boat be sure to adhere to the restrictions listed on the capacity plate. Not only is it dangerous to overpower or overload a small boat, since they can swamp or capsize more easily, but it is also illegal. In many states, there are fines and penalties for exceeding capacity recommendations, including carrying more than the maximum number of people.

In the State of Wisconsin, motorboats less than 26 feet in length and manufactured between January 1966 and November 1972 must have a capacity plate. Motorboats under 21 feet in length manufactured after November 1, 1972 must also have a capacity plate.

Horsepower may not exceed the maximum allowed on the capacity plate for legal operation of a boat in Wisconsin.

SL 6. Equipment and Lighting Requirements

The USCG sets minimum safety standards for vessels and associated equipment. To meet these standards, some of the equipment must be USCG-approved. All boats operating on Wisconsin waters must carry and, if required, have in operation, acceptable personal flotation devices (PFDs), visual distress signals, fire extinguishers, sounding devices, backfire flame arrestor, ventilation systems, and navigation lights as required by federal law. If a boat manufacturer installs the safety equipment, it should not be assumed that the vessel is properly equipped at time of purchase. Boat owners are responsible for ensuring that his or her vessel meets USCG regulations in accordance with vessel size and the waters in which the vessel is being operated. To review the federal requirements for safety equipment, refer to Chapter 2 of this course.

Personal Flotation Devices (PFDs)

The USCG and Wisconsin regulations require that all vessels under 16 feet long must have onboard one Type I, II, III, or V PFD for each person. Canoes and kayaks must also carry a wearable PFD for each person on board.

Vessels 16 feet or longer must be equipped with one Type I, II, III, or V PFD for each person on board, plus at least one Type IV "throwable" for the boat.

Each PFD must be:

- USCG-approved.
- In good condition: no tears, rips, broken straps or snaps.
- Of a suitable size for the intended wearer.
- Readily accessible: not stowed in plastic bags, in locked or closed compartments or under other equipment.

NOTE: Type V PFDs do not meet the PFD carriage requirements unless they are worn.

PFDs should be selected based on planned activities and the water conditions to be encountered. Always look for the USCG-approval number on any PFD to be purchased.

Mandatory PFD Usage

Under federal law, all children under the age of 13 must wear a USCG-approved PFD while on a recreational vessel that is underway, unless they are in an enclosed cabin or below deck.

Navigation Lights

In Wisconsin, navigation lights must be on from sunset to sunrise, and during periods of restricted visibility.

Non-motorized watercraft and sailboats not equipped with a motor, whether underway or at anchor, must carry a white lantern or flashlight. This light should be strong enough to be visible from around the horizon at a distance of 2 miles or more. The light must be displayed in enough time to avoid a collision with another watercraft.

Boats moored or anchored farther than 200 feet from the shoreline must be lighted from sunset to sunrise by a white light visible all around the horizon.

Most motorboats 16 feet or more in length must be equipped with the correct navigation lights by the manufacturer. In any case, the lights must be displayed according to the current federal regulations on all boats. Review the sections in chapters 2 and 3 on navigation lights if you need to refresh your memory.

SL 7. Marine Sanitation Devices (MSDs)

Wisconsin law prohibits discharge of any sewage, treated or untreated, into the state's freshwaters. Recreational vessels with installed toilet facilities must have onboard an operable marine sanitation device (MSD). All installed devices must be USCG certified. Type III MSDs must have the "Y"-valve secured to prevent waste from being discharged into the water. It is unlawful to maintain or operate any boat equipped with a toilet on the inland or outlying waters of this state unless such toilet is sealed or otherwise rendered inoperative or meets the specifications of the Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations. Many marinas provide pumpout facilities in order to empty your MSDs. Boaters should never discharge sewage or wastewater into the waterways. Use the provided pumpout facilities to keep the waters clean.

SL 8. Muffling Devices

To reduce noise, motorboat engines must be equipped with factory-installed mufflers, exhaust water manifolds or other effective muffling system. In Wisconsin, it is unlawful to operate a motorboat without a muffler or a motorboat equipped with a muffler that exceeds the noise level standards (86 dB on "A" weighted scale). Operators must submit to testing when requested. Muffler cutout devices that allow the noise level to exceed 86 dB are prohibited.

SL 9. Boating Accidents

If a boat is involved in an accident, the operator must give necessary assistance to the other vessel and passengers, as long as it will not personally endanger the operator, his or her passengers, crew or the vessel. The operator must also give his or her name, address, and the

identifying number of his or her vessel to anyone injured in the accident and to the owner of any damaged property.

In the State of Wisconsin, a "reportable" boat accident is an accident that results in loss of life, injury that requires medical treatment beyond first aid, boat or property damage in excess of \$2,000, or complete loss of a boat. "Reportable" accidents require the operator to submit a written report within 10 days to the Department of Natural Resources. If the boat operator is physically unable to make the report, and another passenger onboard at the time of the accident is capable of making a report, that passenger must file such report. Operator Boating Accident Report Forms are available from Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources offices, local boat patrols, sheriff's departments, and many local police departments. Forms may be requested by writing to the address below, or by e-mail (leboel@dnr.state.wi.us).

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Boating Program - LE/5
P.O. Box 7921
Madison, WI 53707

NOTE: Failure to comply with these requirements is punishable by a penalty up to \$326. Information from this report may not be used as evidence in a civil or criminal trial.

SL 10. Vessel Speed Restrictions

The following activities are prohibited when boating on Wisconsin waters:

- Operating a motorboat within 100 feet of any dock, raft, pier, or buoyed restricted area on any lake at a speed in excess of "slow-no-wake"
- Operating at greater than "slow-no-wake" speed on lakes 50 acres or less having public access, except when such lakes serve as thoroughfares between 2 or more navigable lakes
- Operating a motorboat at a speed greater than reasonable and prudent under the existing conditions. The speed shall be so controlled as to avoid colliding with any object, person, or conveyance lawfully in or on the water.
- Creating hazardous wakes
- Operating a personal watercraft faster than slow-no-wake within 200 feet of shore on any lake

SL 11. Mooring to Markers or Buoys

It is unlawful to moor or attach a vessel to a beacon, light, buoy (except a mooring buoy) or any other navigational aid installed on public waters by proper authorities. It is also unlawful to tamper with, move, displace, damage or destroy any navigational aid.

SL 12. Reckless and Careless Operation

It is unlawful to operate in a careless, reckless, or negligent manner. Failure to operate a boat in a safe manner could endanger life, or property of other persons. If you operate a boat, you must be aware of, and obey, speed limits and no-wake zones. Operating a motorboat in Wisconsin at a speed greater than is reasonable and prudent under the existing conditions is prohibited. Your speed must be controlled to avoid colliding with any object, person or transport on the water. Other actions, such as speeding in confined or restricted areas, "buzzing" or "wetting down" others, skiing at prohibited times or in restricted areas, can also be construed as reckless or negligent operations.

In Wisconsin, it is unlawful to:

- Fail to stop for an authorized patrol boat.

- Operate a motorboat or use water skis or similar devices while under the influence of alcohol or controlled substances.
- Allow a person who is known to be physically or mentally handicapped to operate a boat if they are incapable of operating under the prevailing conditions.
- Operate a motorboat in a manner to create hazardous wave or wake conditions while approaching or passing another boat. You are responsible for any damage your wake may cause.
- Operate a motorboat repeatedly in a circular motion within 200 feet of another boat or person in the water.
- Approach in a boat or on water skis within 100 feet of a diver's flag unless you are part of the diving operation.
- Ride or sit on the gunwales, top of seat backs or sides or on the deck over the bow while underway, unless there are railings or guards to prevent you from falling overboard.
- Operate a boat in an area clearly marked with buoys or other devices such as swimming or bathing areas, or restricted areas.
- Operate a boat beyond its safe carrying capacity or powering it beyond its safe power capacity considering the existing conditions. (Most boats have a capacity plate installed in view of the operating station. Check the capacity plate for information.)
- Unnecessarily sound any sound-producing device or use a siren.
- Maintain or operate a boat equipped with a toilet on the inland or outlying water of the state unless the toilet has been sealed and is inoperative unless it meets the standards specified by the Department of Commerce.
- Operate a PWC within 200 feet of the shoreline of any lake faster than slow-no-wake.
- Operate a PWC within 100 feet of any other boat faster than slow-no-wake.
- Launch or use a boat, boat trailer or boating equipment if there are any aquatic plants or zebra mussels attached.

SL 13. Interference with Navigation

It is unlawful to:


- Anchor a vessel in the traveled portion of a river or channel that will prevent or interfere with any other passing vessel.
- Obstruct a boat ramp, pier, wharf or access to any facility.
- Obstruct or mark the waters of Wisconsin in a way that may endanger the operation of watercraft or conflict with the marking system prescribed by the State of Wisconsin.
- Operate or otherwise position a vessel, other object or any person in a way that would obstruct or impede the normal flow of traffic on the lakes of this state.


SL 14. Boating Under the Influence

It is unlawful to operate a motorboat or use water skis, aquaplane or similar device while under the influence of an intoxicant or a controlled substance. The use of intoxicants impairs a boat operator's senses and judgment. Intoxicants are related to 30% of all boating accidents. In Wisconsin, all motorboat operators are deemed to have given consent to a blood alcohol test. The blood alcohol concentration intoxication level in Wisconsin is 0.08%. Boat operators under the age of 21 must have no alcohol in their systems. There is zero tolerance for consumption of alcohol by a minor.

Body Weight in Pounds

	100	120	140	160	180	200	220	240
1	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
2	0.08	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.03
3	0.11	0.09	0.08	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.05
4	0.15	0.12	0.11	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.07	0.06
5	0.19	0.16	0.13	0.12	0.11	0.09	0.09	0.08
6	0.23	0.19	0.16	0.14	0.13	0.11	0.1	0.09
7	0.26	0.22	0.19	0.16	0.15	0.13	0.12	0.11
8	0.3	0.25	0.21	0.19	0.17	0.15	0.14	0.13
9	0.34	0.28	0.24	0.21	0.19	0.17	0.15	0.14
10	0.38	0.31	0.27	0.23	0.21	0.19	0.17	0.16

 Impaired (may be under the influence)

 Under the influence

 Absolutely Do Not operate

SL 15. Mandatory Violator Education

Any person violating [s. 30.68](#) (e.g., operating in a careless, negligent or reckless manner so as to endanger that person's life, property or person or the life, property or person of another, or authorize or knowingly permit the boat to be operated by any person who by reason of physical or mental disability is incapable of operating such boat under the prevailing circumstances) is required to obtain a certificate of satisfactory completion of a safety course under [s. 30.74 \(1\)](#).

SL 16. PWC Regulations

In Wisconsin there are additional age restrictions on the operation of PWCs:

- No one under the age of 12 may operate, lease or rent a PWC.
- No one under the age of 16 may rent or lease a PWC.
- Children ages 12-15 may operate a PWC if in possession of a boating safety course completion certificate issued by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources or another State. Adult supervision is not a substitute for a certificate.

A person 16 years of age and older is authorized to operate a PWC in the State of Wisconsin.

Personal Watercraft are classified as Class A (less than 16 feet in length) inboard boats. All PWC must be registered and display valid registration decals and registration numbers on the forward half of both sides of the craft. PWC operators must obey all boating regulations just as any other motorboat. In addition, PWC operators must comply with the following additional regulations:

- Operating a PWC is prohibited from sunset to sunrise.

- All persons riding a PWC must wear a PFD of the proper size and type (Type I, II, III, or V).
- No person may operate a PWC equipped by the manufacturer with a lanyard without the lanyard attached to the operator, and no person may sell a PWC manufactured after 1/1/93 unless equipped with a lanyard or self-circling device.
- It is unlawful to operate a PWC facing backwards.

Rental PWC:

- No one under 16 may rent a PWC.
- Rental agents must provide PFDs of proper size and type.
- Rental agents must give renters instruction on PWC operation, unless the renter holds a valid boating safety student certificate or has previous experience operating a PWC.
- Towing those engaged in water skiing, aquaplaning, or similar activities is prohibited, unless the PWC is designed to seat 3 people. There is no limit on the number of skiers.
- PWC towing of stranded or disabled boats is only allowed if speeds do not exceed slow-no-wake.

Operation of a PWC within 100 feet of another boat or PWC is only allowed if the following requirements are met:

- Operation does not exceed a slow-no-wake speed.
- Neither boat is involved in any type of water skiing or similar activity.

It is unlawful to operate a PWC within 100 feet of the following:

- Another boat towing a skier or person engaged in similar activity.
- The towrope of another motorboat towing a skier or person engaged in similar activity.
- A person involved in skiing or a similar activity.

No person operating any type of motorboat, including a PWC, which is towing persons engaged in water skiing, aquaplaning, or similar activity, may operate within 100 feet of any occupied anchored boat, any PWC, any marked swimming area, or public boat landing.

No person water skiing or engaged in similar activity may approach within 100 feet of a PWC or allow the tow rope to get within 100 feet of a PWC.

Effective August 1, 1998, no person may operate a PWC at greater than slow-no-wake within 200 feet of shore on any Wisconsin lake. This does not apply to water-ski pick-up or drop areas, which are marked with regulatory markers and open to operators of PWC and to persons and motorboats engaged in water skiing.

SL 17. Water Ski Regulations

The following activities are prohibited:

- Operating a motorboat towing a person whether or not on water skis, aquaplane, parasail or similar device, unless there is a competent person in the boat in addition to the operator in a position to observe the activity of the person being towed. The observer must be able to observe the person being towed and relay signals to the operator.
- Water skiing, aquaplaning or engaging in a similar activity from sunset to sunrise.
- Operating a motorboat with a person in tow on water skis, aquaplane, or similar device other than in a careful and prudent manner and at a reasonable and safe distance from people or property.
- Operating a motorboat towing people engaged in water skiing, aquaplaning, parasailing, or similar activity within 100 feet of an occupied anchored boat, a PWC, or marked swimming area or public boat landing, except where pick-up and drop areas are established and marked with regulatory markers.
- Operating a PWC towing a person on water skis, aquaplane or similar device unless the PWC is designed to seat at least 3 people.
- Water skiing, aquaplaning or engaging in similar activity within 100 feet of a PWC or allowing the tow rope while in use to get within 100 feet of a PWC.

SL 18. Divers-down Flag

Federal navigation rules require vessels restricted in the ability to maneuver to display appropriate day shapes or lights. To meet this requirement, recreational vessels engaged in diving activities may exhibit a rigid replica of the international code flag "A" or a "Divers-Down" flag not less than one meter in height, or at night, display navigation lights 360 degrees red on top, white in middle and red on the bottom. The diver's flag shall not be less than 12 inches high and 15 inches long, displaying one diagonal white stripe 3 inches wide on a red background and must be clearly apparent at a distance of 100 yards.

In Wisconsin, it is unlawful for a boat or water skier to operate or approach closer than 100 feet from a skin diver's flag or a swimmer, unless the boat is part of the skin diving operation or is accompanying the swimmer. Underwater skin diving and swimming with swim fins outside a marked swim area or beyond 150 feet from shore are prohibited, unless the location of such swimming or diving is marked by a diver's flag.

Scuba diving outside a marked swim area is prohibited, unless the location of the scuba diving is marked by a diver's flag. Except in an emergency, anyone engaged in such swimming or diving may not rise to the surface outside of 50 feet from diver's flag. No diver or swimmer may interfere with someone engaged in fishing. No diver or swimmer may engage in those activities in an established navigation lane.

SL 19. Liveries (Rental Agencies)

All liveries should provide renters with information on rules, laws, and basic navigation and boating safety and ensure that all required safety equipment is onboard.

In Wisconsin, the following rules apply to PWC rentals:

- No one under 16 may rent a PWC.
- Rental agents must provide PFDs of proper size and type.
- Rental agents must give renters instruction on PWC operation, unless the renter holds a valid boating safety student certificate or has previous experience operating a PWC.
- Towing those engaged in water skiing, aquaplaning, or similar activities is prohibited, unless the PWC is designed to seat 3 people. There is no limit on the number of skiers.
- PWC towing of stranded or disabled boats is only allowed if speeds do not exceed slow-no-wake.

SL 20. Other State-Specific Regulations

Any town, village or city may, in the interest of public health, safety or welfare, including the public's interest in preserving the state's natural resources, enact ordinances applicable on any waters of this state within its jurisdiction if the ordinances are not contrary to or inconsistent with Wisconsin boating law and if the ordinances relate to the equipment, use or operation of boats.

Environmental Awareness

The Zebra Mussel – A Boater's Concern

The zebra mussel, a new invader to the Great Lakes, is about the size of a thumbnail. Zebra mussels can cause severe problems because they are very prolific and can attach in great numbers to any solid underwater surface. They are of special concern to boaters since they can encrust on boats hulls or cause damage to an engine.

Please take the following precautions when you transfer your boat from the zebra mussels infested waters of the Great Lakes or the Mississippi River to your favorite inland water:

- DRAIN all water from your boat, trailer, bilge's, live wells, coolers, buckets, engine compartments or any other areas where water may be trapped. Even small amounts of water can hold zebra mussel larvae.
- INSPECT your boat hull, prop, trailer or any other equipment and thoroughly scrape off any attached mussels. Young adults attached to boat hulls feel like grainy surfaces.

- FLUSH your boat, trailer and any other equipment with hot tap water above 105° F. Hotter temperatures in the range of 110° to 140° F are more effective for killing zebra mussels. An alternative to hot water treatment is to disinfect live wells or other areas where water is trapped using a household bleach solution (two tablespoons of bleach per one gallon of hot water). Do not put this bleach water into the lake!
- LEAVE your boat or equipment in a sunny location to dry for at least 3 days before using it on inland waters. Adult zebra mussels, when deprived of a moist environment, should die. Outboard engines should be tipped up to allow cooling passages to thoroughly drain in order to prevent mussels from attaching. Another option is to flush the motor cooling system with hot water using special "Motor Muffs" available at your local marina.

Additional Information

For more information on Wisconsin boating law refer to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources at <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/caer/cs/registrations/boats.htm>, Wisconsin Statutes, Chapter 30 – Navigable Waters, Harbors, and Navigation, Subchapter V – Regulation of Boating at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/rsb/stats.html>.