

PE Speed-gram

Personal Watercraft Safety

Although sales momentum has been slowing, personal watercraft (PWC) now account for more than one-third of the new recreational boat sales in the United States. With more than 1 million PWC in current operation, it will come as no surprise that these vessels appear with increasing frequency in boating safety-related incidents. Most significantly, while the number of recreational boating fatalities has been declining in recent years, the number of personal watercraft-related fatalities has been increasing. Preliminary numbers for 1997 indicate 83 PWC fatalities. In 1993, there were 26 personal watercraft fatalities a year.

PWC are the only type of recreational vessel for which the leading cause of fatalities is not drowning; in PWC fatalities, more persons die from blunt force trauma than from drowning. The increase in fatalities and distinctive way in which fatalities occur prompted the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to examine the nature of PWC accidents (see box).

Personal Watercraft Accident Data

(814 accidents form January to June 1997*)

- 73% of accidents occurred during first hour of operation
- 84% of operators had no boating safety training
- 25% of accidents involved rentals
- 68% of renters were under age 25

*Source: National Transportation Safety Board

As a result of this study, the NTSB made a number of safety recommendations to PWC manufacturers. Boating safety education organizations were asked to "include information on the safe operation of personal watercraft in all recreational boating courses." The NTSB also asked the U.S. Coast Guard to develop "comprehensive safety standards specific to the risks of PWC." Prior to this initiative, the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary (USCGAUX) has highlighted PWC safety-related issues in many of its public education products. And, our National Commodore, Everette Tucker, Jr., has been emphasizing the need for PWC safety instruction in all our public education courses and programs.

USCGAUX public education materials for PWC offer products geared to a range of rider interest and requirements. For example, a one hour PWC course (not approved by the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) because of its length) was developed to be taught at PWC dealers, boat ramps, and other nontraditional locations. As 25% of PWC accidents involved rentals, this is an ideal product to get some basic information in the hands of new and inexperienced riders. At the other end of the scale is the *Boating Safely Course* that is NASBLA-approved as a stand-alone PWC course that meets many state-mandated safe boating education requirements of PWC riders. There is also a 30-minute videotape PWC course, developed jointly by Department of Education personnel and the United Safe Boating Institute (USBI).

**United States Coast Guard Auxiliary
Department of Education**

Any USCGAUX classroom or dockside PE or PA activity provides an ideal forum to advise PWC-users of important safety concerns. One fundamental issue is "off-throttle steering"-the lack of control when the PWC water jet pump is not operating, or when the PWC is airborne during jumping. Another issue is the need for routine checks of the engine compartment by the operator. Cracked or worn fuel lines, hoses and loose engine mounts present fire and mechanical hazards. Operators should also be advised that the mandated fire extinguisher should not be kept in the engine compartment; that is where most fires start.

In addition to the NTSB study, the Personal Watercraft Industry Association (PWIA) is proposing model legislation that would require PWC operators to take a safety course and restrict operation of the craft to drivers 16 and over. A PWIA spokesperson noted that (PWC) "owners, even if schooled or experienced, typically loan their machine to unschooled or inexperienced friends and relatives." Requiring a boating-safety course addresses these operators.

The need and demand for PWC education are clearly in the customer base of USCGAUX public education activities. Products are in place to address the concerns of the PWC industry, state and federal agencies and the boating public. The challenge is to merge these elements within our public education boating activities whether classroom or dockside oriented.

What can you do to help? First, launch an initiative in your flotilla to increase the number of PWC Courses taught. In a state with mandatory boating safety education, try the 8 hour *Boating Safely Course*. In other states consider presenting either the *Boating Safely Course* or the *One Hour PWC Course*. Second, ensure that you discuss PWC more thoroughly in either the BS&S or the new *Sailing Fundamentals* courses.

Here are some other ideas:

- Visit a PWC dealer to learn more about these novel craft, borrow operator's manuals, and see if the dealer is willing to furnish space for use as a classroom. Most dealers see the need for PWC instruction (and the threat to their market without such education) and are very willing to cooperate. Some dealers are willing to sponsor classes for new PWC owners. Remember that many (perhaps most) PWC riders do not consider themselves "boaters" and do not seek out conventional educational opportunities (e.g. adult education programs). It is up to us to bring these products to the market. At a minimum, advertise these courses in PWC showrooms.

- Consider team teaching. Find an Auxiliary instructor with PWC experience and assign other instructors to team teach with the "pro." This ensures that students will find the course relevant and train your instructors at the same time.

- Work with VE personnel to set up joint activities-such as combination examination station and class near ramps where these craft are launched.

As noted, the NTSB found that there is a clear need for PWC education. Auxiliary management have made a commitment to increase the number of courses. Our success in this program is up to you!