

PFD Laws and Shocking Sails

Several states aim to strengthen their life jacket laws or have already passed new, more stringent regulations regarding personal flotation devices (PFDs).

The dramatic increase in boating-related fatalities during winter months sparked New York state's recent seasonal mandate. Starting this fall, from Nov. 1 to May 1, anyone aboard a boat shorter than 21 feet—all pleasure craft, with or without an engine—must wear a Coast Guard-approved PFD. The N.Y. Department of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation will enforce the law, and violators will face fines ranging from \$25 to \$100.

In Maryland, children younger than 7 are currently required to don a life jacket while underway on boats less than 21 feet. Legislators and the Department of Natural Resources are trying to raise the age limit from 7 to 13 years old.

This recent push to change the regulation came in the wake of more than a dozen boating fatalities in Maryland waterways in 2009, including the death of an 11-year-old girl who was not wearing a life jacket.

At presstime, the bill was still awaiting General Assembly approval. But, as it has

the endorsement of law enforcement and the state's governor, it is expected to pass.

A JOLTING CAUTION

Following its closure in August, the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal was re-opened in mid-September on a case-by-case basis for boats longer than 20 feet. Small boats, personal watercraft, and sailboats without motors are still prohibited from travelling through the area. To receive permission to pass through, call the onsite Coast Guard at 630/336-0296 or hail them on VHF Channel 16.

About 30 miles from Chicago, the waterway—between markers 296.0 and 296.7—was closed and a safety zone was established to protect boaters from possible electric shock due to the newly increased operating parameters of the Electric Fish Dispersal Barrier. The Electric Fish Dispersal Barrier, which was constructed to keep invasive fish species out of the Great Lakes, was initially operated at 1 volt per inch, but was increased to 2 volts per inch to repel juvenile or other smaller invasive fish.

When passing through the safety



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zone, the Coast Guard suggests remaining seated and avoiding contact with anything outside the boat's hull, any metal object unnecessary for navigation, and any water outside of the vessel or standing inside it. Boaters entering the canal should either closely supervise children and pets, or send them belowdecks. Boaters are also advised not to linger near the barrier.

For updates on the status of the safety zone, go to www.uscg.fishbarrierinfo.com or call 216/902-6020 or 312/846-5330.