

the
HANDBOOK!

OF
WISCONSIN
BOATING LAWS
AND
RESPONSIBILITIES

Approved by



On the Water

In addition to the laws mentioned previously, here are some other Wisconsin regulations that apply when vessel operators are on the water. Please also see the section titled “Specifically for PWC.”

Unlawful Operation

Wisconsin law states that these dangerous operating practices are illegal.

- **Negligent or Reckless Operation** of a vessel or the reckless manipulation of water skis, a surfboard, or a similar device is operating in a manner that causes danger to the life, limb, or property of any person. Examples of negligent or reckless operation are:
 - Jumping the wake of any vessel that is towing a person on water skis, inner tube, wakeboard, or other similar device
 - Operating a vessel within any area marked off or set aside as a prohibited area or a swim area
 - Weaving your vessel through congested waterway traffic
 - Operating a vessel in a manner that creates hazardous wave or wake conditions while approaching or passing another vessel
 - Steering toward another object or person in the water and swerving at the last possible moment in order to avoid collision
 - Chasing, harassing, or disturbing wildlife with your vessel
 - Displaying blue-colored lights that may be confused with an authorized patrol or emergency vessel.
- **Operating a Boat With a Person Riding on the Bow, Deck, or Gunwale** is allowing the operator or passengers to ride or sit on the gunwales, tops of seat backs or sides, or on the decking over the bow while underway.
- **Overloading** is loading the vessel beyond the recommended capacity shown on the capacity plate installed by the vessel manufacturer. 

The operator must limit the vessel’s load to the total weight or maximum number of persons shown on the capacity plate, whichever is more restrictive.
- **Overpowering** is providing more power than is needed. It is illegal to sell, equip, operate, or allow others to operate a boat with any motor or other propulsion machinery beyond its safe power capacity.

- **Improper Speed or Distance** is not maintaining a proper speed and/or distance while operating a vessel. Specifically, it is illegal to:
 - Operate a vessel at a distance from other vessels or at a speed that exceeds safe and reasonable limits given the waterway traffic, marked speed limits, weather, and other boating conditions.
 - Exceed the speeds posted or charted in any specific zone or area.
 - Operate a vessel repeatedly in a circuitous manner within 200 feet of another vessel or person in the water.
 - Operate a vessel within 100 feet of the shoreline, any dock, raft, pier, or restricted area on any lake at greater than “slow, no wake speed.”
 - Operate a vessel at greater than “slow, no wake speed” on lakes that are 50 acres or less and have public access, unless such lakes serve as thoroughfares between two or more navigable lakes. Lake size is determined in the most current version of “Wisconsin Lakes,” PUB-FH-800, at <http://dnr.wi.gov/lakes/lakebook/wilakes2009bma.pdf>.
 - Operate a vessel at greater than “slow, no wake speed” within 100 feet of a swimmer, unless the vessel is assisting the swimmer.
 - Operate a motorboat, other than a PWC, at a speed in excess of “slow, no wake speed” within 100 feet of the shoreline of any lake.
 - Operate a vessel faster than “slow, no wake speed” within 100 feet of a patrol boat displaying emergency lights.

“**Slow, No Wake Speed**” means a speed at which a vessel moves as slowly as possible while still maintaining steerage control.

- **Unsafe Condition** is placing or leaving in public waters any vessel that is not safe to operate. Law enforcement officers may instruct the operator to take immediate corrective action or return to mooring if any of the following “unsafe conditions” exist.
 - The vessel is overloaded or overpowered.
 - There are insufficient personal flotation devices, fire extinguishers, backfire flame arrestors, ventilation systems, or navigation lights.
 - The vessel is leaking fuel or has fuel in the bilges.

Specifically for PWC

PWC operators must obey the laws that apply to other vessels as well as obey additional requirements that apply specifically to the operation of personal watercraft. Particular attention must be paid to the PWC's capacity plate to determine the appropriate number of people allowed on the PWC.

Requirements Specific to PWC

- Every person on board a PWC must *wear* a U.S. Coast Guard–approved Type I, II, III, or V PFD.
- An operator of a PWC equipped with a lanyard-type engine cut-off switch must attach the lanyard to his or her person, clothing, or PFD.
- A PWC may not be operated between sunset and sunrise.
- A PWC operator must always face forward.
- A PWC may not be operated at faster than “slow, no wake speed” within:
 - 100 feet of any other vessel on any waterbody
 - 200 feet of shore on any lake
 - 100 feet of a dock, pier, raft, or restricted area on any lake
- There are minimum age and boater education requirements for operators of PWC.
- A PWC must be operated in a responsible manner. Maneuvers that endanger people or property are prohibited, including:
 - Jumping a wake with a PWC within 100 feet of another vessel
 - Operating within 100 feet of a vessel that is towing a person on water skis, inner tube, wakeboard, or similar device, or operating within 100 feet of the tow rope or person being towed
 - Weaving a PWC through congested waterway traffic
 - Steering toward another object or person in the water and swerving at the last possible moment in order to avoid collision
 - Chasing, harassing, or disturbing wildlife with a PWC



Specifically for Skiing

Vessel operators towing a person(s) on water skis, a surfboard, or any other device have additional laws.

Requirements for Towing Skiers

- A person may not be towed behind a vessel between sunset and sunrise.
- When a vessel is towing a person on water skis, a surfboard, or other device, the operator must have another competent person on board to act as an observer *or* the vessel must be equipped with a wide-angle rearview mirror.
- A PWC operator may not tow a person on water skis or other devices unless:
 - The PWC is designed and recommended by the manufacturer to accommodate at least three people, *and...*
 - A competent observer is on board and in a position to observe the person being towed *or* the PWC is equipped with a wide-angle rearview mirror.
- Those towing skiers on water skis, a surfboard, or similar devices and those being towed must act in a safe and prudent manner.
 - Vessels towing persons may not come within 100 feet of any occupied anchored boat, any PWC, or any marked swimming area or public boat landing.
 - Persons being towed behind a vessel on water skis, a surfboard, or other device, or their towing rope, may not come within 100 feet of a PWC.

Avoid Propeller Strike Injuries!

Most propeller strike accidents result from operator error. Victims include swimmers, scuba divers, fallen water-skiers, and boat operators or passengers. Most propeller accidents can be prevented by following basic safe boating practices.

- Maintain a proper lookout. The primary cause of propeller strike accidents is operator inattention.
- Make sure the engine is off so that the propeller is not rotating when passengers are boarding or leaving a boat.
- Never start a boat with the engine in gear.
- Slow down when approaching congested areas and anchorages. In congested areas, always be alert for swimmers and divers.