

Michigan Boating Laws and Responsibilities

Below is a summary of some of the Michigan Boating Laws as defined by the Michigan DNR.

Age and Operator Restrictions

Persons less than 12 years of age:

- May operate a boat powered by a motor of no more than 6 hp legally without restrictions.
- May operate a boat powered by a motor of more than 6 hp but no more than 35 hp legally only if they:
 - Have been issued a boating safety certificate and have it on board the boat and...
 - Are directly supervised on board by a person at least 16 years of age.
- May not operate a boat powered by a motor of more than 35 hp legally under any conditions.

Those born on or after July 1, 1996, may operate a boat legally only if they have been issued a boating safety certificate and have it on board the boat.

Those born before July 1, 1996, may operate a boat legally without restrictions.

Personal Watercraft (Jet Skies):

Those less than 14 years of age may not legally operate a PWC.

Those 14 and 15 years of age may operate a PWC legally only if they have obtained a boating safety certificate and...

- He or she is accompanied on board by his or her parent or legal guardian or by a person at least 21 years of age who has been designated by the parent or legal guardian or...
- He or she is operating or riding the PWC at a distance of not more than 100 feet from his or her parent or legal guardian or from a person at least 21 years of age who has been designated by the parent or legal guardian.

Those at least 16 years of age and born after December 31, 1978, may operate a PWC legally **ONLY** if they have obtained a boating safety certificate.

Those born on or before December 31, 1978, may operate a PWC legally without restrictions.

Laws Specifically for PWC (Jet Skies)

Personal watercraft (PWC) operators must obey additional legal requirements that apply specifically to the operation of PWC on Michigan waters. Requirements Specific to Personal watercraft (PWC):

- Each person riding on or being towed behind a PWC must wear a U.S. Coast Guard (USCG)–approved wearable Type I, II, or III personal flotation device (PFD). Inflatable PFDs may not be used.
- You may not allow a child under 7 years of age to ride on or be towed behind a PWC unless with a parent or guardian or a designee of the parent or guardian.
- The lanyard of a PWC’s engine cut-off switch must be attached to the person, clothing, or PFD of the operator.
- It is illegal to operate a PWC during the period that begins at sunset and ends at 8:00 a.m. “Sunset” means that time determined by the National Weather Service.
- A PWC must be operated in a reasonable and prudent manner at all times. It is illegal to:
 - Jump the wake of another vessel unnecessarily close to the other vessel.
 - Weave your PWC through congested traffic.
 - Swerve at the last possible moment to avoid collision.
- A PWC must be operated at “slow, no wake speed” if crossing within 150 feet behind another vessel unless the other vessel is also a PWC.
- You may not operate a PWC within 200 feet of a Great Lakes shoreline unless traveling at “slow, no wake speed” perpendicular to the shoreline.
- You may not operate a PWC in waters less than two feet deep unless you are operating at “slow, no wake speed” or are docking or launching your PWC.

- It is illegal to harass wildlife or disturb aquatic vegetation with your PWC.

Laws Specifically for Water Skiing

Vessel operators towing a person(s) on water skis or a similar device have additional laws they must follow.

Requirements for Towing Skiers:

- Every person being towed behind a vessel on water skis, a surfboard, or similar device must wear a U.S. Coast Guard (USCG)–approved wearable Type I, II, or III personal flotation device (PFD). Inflatable PFDs may not be used.
- Every vessel towing a person(s) on water skis, a surfboard, or a similar device must have a person on board, in addition to the vessel operator, observing the towed person(s) at all times.
- It is legal to tow persons on water skis, surfboards, or any device of this type only between:
 - One hour before sunrise and one hour after sunset if towed behind a boat.
 - 8:00 a.m. and sunset if towed behind a personal watercraft (PWC)
- Persons being towed must stay at least 100 feet away from:
 - A shoreline (if operating in water less than three feet deep.)
 - Any moored or anchored vessel.
 - A dock or raft.
 - Any marked swimming area or person(s) in the water.

On the Water

- No High Speed Boating after Dark.
- No High Speed Boating between the islands when swimmers are present.
- No High Speed Boating in bays.

Boat traffic goes in a Counterclockwise (CCW) direction around the lake.

In addition to the laws mentioned previously, here are some other Michigan regulations that apply when vessel operators are on the water. Unlawful and Dangerous Operation, Michigan law designates these dangerous operating practices as illegal.

- Reckless Operation of a vessel or reckless manipulation of water skis, a surfboard, or similar device is defined as an operation which disregards the safety or rights of others or endangers the person or property of others. Some examples are:
 - Weaving your vessel through congested waterway traffic or swerving at the last possible moment in order to avoid collision.
 - Jumping the wake of another vessel unnecessarily close to the other vessel or when visibility around the other vessel is restricted.
 - Chasing, harassing, or disturbing wildlife with your vessel.
 - Causing damage from the wake of your vessel.
- Failure to Regulate Speed is operating a vessel at speeds that may cause danger to life or property of any other person or at speeds that will not permit you to bring your vessel to a safe stop. It is illegal to operate a vessel:
 - In excess of 55 mph unless you are at least one mile offshore on the Great Lakes or Lake St. Clair.
 - At greater than “slow, no wake speed” when a person is in the bow of a vessel without proper seating.
 - Faster than is reasonable and prudent under the conditions (weather, vessel traffic, etc.)
 - “Slow, No Wake Speed” means the slowest speed at which it is still possible to maintain steering and which does not create a wake.

- Improper Distance is not maintaining a proper distance while operating a vessel or towing a person. To maintain a proper distance when you are operating at greater than “slow, no wake speed” (except in channels that are not posted), the vessel or persons being towed must not be within 100 feet of:
 - A shoreline (if operating in water less than three feet deep) • Any moored or anchored vessel.
 - A dock or raft.
 - Any marked swimming area or person(s) in the water.
- Improper Distance for PWC means that, if operating at greater than “slow, no wake speed,” a PWC also must:
 - Stay at least 200 feet from any Great Lakes shoreline.
 - Not cross within 150 feet behind another vessel other than another personal watercraft (PWC).
- Improper Direction is defined as the failure to operate in a counterclockwise (CCW) direction except in areas marked by well-defined channels or rivers.
- Boating in Restricted Areas is defined as operating within a restricted area clearly marked by buoys, beacons, diver-down flags, etc.
- Riding on the Bow, Gunwales, or Transom is allowing passengers to ride on a motorboat in places where there may be a chance of falling overboard. While operating at greater than “slow, no wake speed,” persons on a motorboat may not sit, stand, or walk on any portion of a motorboat not designed for that purpose. This includes riding on the gunwale.
- Insufficient equipment is operating a vessel that is not carrying, storing, maintaining, and using marine safety equipment on board the vessel as required by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Protecting the Environment: Invasive Aquatic Plants and Animals

Michigan waters are threatened by non-native, invasive, aquatic plants and animals, such as zebra mussels and Eurasian water-milfoil. These species and others are harmful to recreational boating and can cause extensive economic and natural resource damage. Effective 2019, there are new requirements to stop the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species.

- A person shall not:
 - Launch or transport watercraft or trailers unless they are free of aquatic organisms, including plants.
 - Transport a watercraft without removing all drain plugs and draining all water from bilges, ballast tanks, and live wells.
 - Release unused bait into the water.
- Boaters should learn to identify invasive species that they may encounter and take precautions to prevent the spread of these species.
 - Inspect boats, trailers, and equipment, and remove all mud, debris, and aquatic plant material from trailers and watercraft before launching or retrieving a watercraft. Use a hose or power washer when available, and dry all equipment thoroughly before leaving the access area.
 - Drain live wells, bilges, and all water from boats before leaving the access site. Disinfect live wells and bilges with a bleach solution (1/2 cup bleach to 5 gallons of water) when possible. Fish diseases and microscopic life stages of aquatic invasive species can be hiding in seemingly clean water, so draining is an important step.
 - Dispose of unused bait in the trash. Do not release bait into the water. Release of bait and minnows can lead to the unintended introduction of aquatic invasive species.
 - Do not transfer fish to water bodies other than where they were caught. This helps prevent the spread of both aquatic invasive species and fish diseases.
- For more tips, information, or to report an invasive species, visit www.michigan.gov/InvasiveSpecies.

For the complete information contained in the “Handbook of Michigan Boating Laws and Responsibilities” go to https://assets.kalkomey.com/boater/pdfs/handbook/mi_handbook_entire.pdf