

# Florida personal watercraft

rules and safety tips



Florida Fish and Wildlife  
Conservation Commission

[MyFWC.com](http://MyFWC.com)

## Important Points To Remember...

-  Always wear a life jacket
-  Attach the lanyard to you, your clothing or life jacket
-  Remember there are no brakes on a PWC
-  Pay attention to what is going on around you
-  Keep plenty of distance between you and others
-  Operate at a safe speed

## You can be responsible and still have fun!



*This material is recognized by the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) to benefit boating safety.*



# Florida personal watercraft rules and safety tips

Operating personal watercraft (PWC) is fun for many people, but people must understand that they are high performance vessels, not toys. Remember: Not following safety precautions can quickly spell disaster for you and those people around you.

This booklet was created to familiarize you with Florida's PWC rules and safety tips prior to operating a PWC. For your own safety and the safety of others, we encourage you to learn from this material, apply the knowledge gained and ask questions about topics you don't completely understand. Also, there is a lot to learn about safe boating, so we encourage everyone to attend a safe boating course.

**It's important to remember your PWC is a jet-pump vessel and has some peculiar handling characteristics. Never lose sight of these three facts:**

- 1. There are no brakes on most PWC!** Be careful about going too fast near any other object, including another PWC.
- 2. To turn most PWC, you must advance the throttle to provide the thrust necessary to turn.** If you do not apply throttle, a PWC continues to move in the direction it was going when you released the throttle, no matter which direction you turn the handlebars.
- 3. A PWC is propelled when water is drawn into a pump and forced out through the steering nozzle under high pressure. Water and loose items forced through the nozzle can cause severe injuries. Keep everyone clear of the nozzle at all times.**

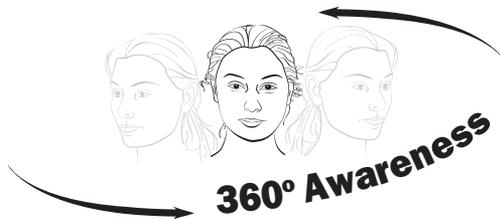
## Be Responsible

- As the operator, you are responsible for the safe operation of your PWC at all times. Don't forget you are responsible for complying with the navigation rules and posted speed restrictions. Stay alert, keep a proper lookout, operate the PWC at a safe speed and distance, take action to avoid collisions and yield to other vessels when required.
- The most common causes of PWC accidents are careless operation, inattention, operator inexperience and no proper look-out. Careless activities such as wake/surf jumping, spraying other boaters, riding too fast and too close and other similar activities can lead to serious injury or death. These are not only unsafe, they are against the law. In order to

avoid being involved in an accident, be sure to constantly keep an eye on what's happening around you, slow down a little and use good judgment. Ultimately, you are responsible for the safe operation of your vessel.



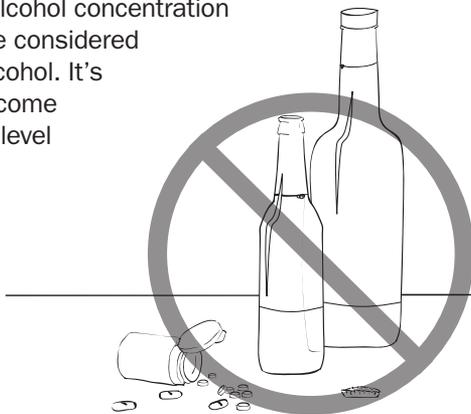
- If you operate your vessel in a way that places any person or property in danger, this is considered reckless or careless operation. Reckless operation of a PWC specifically includes weaving back and forth between other vessels, swerving at the last possible moment (playing chicken or spraying) and jumping a vessel wake unreasonably close or when your view is obstructed.
- Always know what's going on around your vessel! Most boating accidents involve collisions with other vessels or fixed objects (docks, markers, bridge piers, etc.). Scan constantly while operating your vessel and maintain 360° awareness on the water. Remember that staying alert is the most critical part of boating.



- PWC manufacturers place several warning labels on their products, and these cover important information for all riders. Be sure to take a few minutes before you get out on the water to review all warning labels. Read and follow the recommendations to ensure the safety of yourself and your passengers.
- Always be courteous and respectful of other people and the environment. It is important to make sure wildlife and our natural resources aren't adversely affected by your use of Florida's waterways. We want to make sure future generations can enjoy Florida as we do.
  - o Be careful to avoid disturbing people and wildlife
  - o Obey conservation and safe boating laws
  - o Exercise "zero-tolerance" for litter

**Bottom line – if you are likely to disturb others, find another place to ride.**

- On small vessels (like a PWC), changes in the weather can be disastrous. If you see dark clouds, shifting winds and graying skies, you need to head for a safe place. Water conditions can become dangerous before you know it.
- If you were born on or after Jan. 1, 1988, and are operating a vessel with a 10-horsepower engine or more, carry your Florida Boating Safety Education Identification Card and photographic identification. It's the law!
- Operating your vessel while under the influence of drugs or alcohol is not just irresponsible, it's illegal. Drinking alcohol or using other drugs while boating is always a bad idea. It can slow your reaction time and affects your judgment. Operating a vessel while impaired by drugs or alcohol is dangerous and will get you arrested. Just like on the highway, if you have a breath alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.08 or higher, you are considered to be under the influence of alcohol. It's important to know you may become impaired at a much lower BAC level than 0.08, especially with the combination of heat, glare, vibration and other outdoor conditions that intensify the effects of alcohol and other drugs. In Florida, anyone younger than 21 years old may not possess alcoholic beverages or have a BAC of 0.02 or higher.



## **Know The Rules**

- A non-inflatable life jacket must be worn by everyone riding a PWC and anyone being pulled behind a boat or PWC. Anyone younger than 6 years old must also wear a life jacket while underway on state waters in any vessel less than 26 feet long. The primary cause of death in boating accidents is drowning. Nearly all of those could be prevented by wearing a life jacket.
- PWC are fun to operate but they are not toys! PWCs are fast-moving vessels that are small and difficult for other boaters to see. You are required to scan constantly for other people, objects and vessels. Be

mindful of your speed and keep extra distance between you and other vessels, people and objects. You must always be prepared to take evasive action to avoid a collision, regardless of the situation. Never assume you have the right of way.

If a PWC is factory equipped with an ignition safety switch, you must attach the ignition safety switch (kill switch) lanyard to your body, life jacket or clothing while operating a PWC. This switch shuts off the engine if you are thrown into the water and also helps make sure you can get back to your vessel and don't get run over by it. If the switch does not shut off the engine when the lanyard is pulled, do not operate the PWC until it is repaired.

- You should board your PWC from the rear and keep your weight low on the vessel. Falling off a PWC is common when riding, and it's important to know how to re-board properly. If the PWC rolls over, look for the manufacturer's label that shows the proper direction to turn it back over to avoid serious damage. You should be fully capable of re-boarding it from the water since this can be difficult when you are tired and inexperienced.



- PWCs are allowed to be operated only from one-half hour before sunrise to one-half hour after sunset.
- You need a couple of other items of safety equipment on your PWC.
  - o Your whistle may be attached to your life jacket or ignition safety switch lanyard. You also will need to carry a fire extinguisher. Be familiar with where it is located and check it often to make sure it is fully charged.
  - o Make sure your PWC or other vessel is equipped with a wide-angle rearview mirror that allows you to see behind the vessel if you are pulling a skier or someone on a tube. The factory mirrors on PWCs generally do not meet this requirement. If you do not have a wide-angle mirror,

you must have someone on board observe the person being towed. In addition, anyone being towed behind the vessel must be wearing a life jacket. You cannot legally pull someone behind a vessel except during daylight hours.

- Florida law states a person must be at least 14 years old to operate a PWC. Because PWCs require physical capability and mature judgment, manufacturers recommend operators be at least 16 years old, sometimes older. It is illegal to allow a person younger than 14 years of age to operate a PWC.

## Remember...

Most PWC do not have braking systems and won't turn unless you apply the throttle. Always be on the lookout for other boaters. Use common sense, avoid sudden or aggressive maneuvers and be prepared to avoid an accident at any time.

## Get Educated

- Any person born on or after Jan. 1, 1988, who operates a vessel powered by a motor of 10 or more horsepower must carry photographic identification and either a Florida Boating Safety Education Identification Card issued by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) or a Florida Boater Education Temporary Certificate. Acceptable photographic identification includes your name, address, date of birth, name of issuing organization and a recent photo.
- A Florida Boater Education Temporary Certificate is a knowledge exam valid for 12 months only. This exam is not approved by NASBLA and is good only in Florida. This certificate cannot be exchanged for a permanent boating safety card.
- If you have a temporary certificate and want to find out how to get your lifetime Florida Boating Safety Education Identification Card, go to the FWC website, <http://www.myfwc.com/boating/safety-education/>.

The following are exemptions to Florida's education law requirements:

- A person who has a U.S. Coast Guard Captain's license
- A person operating on a private lake or pond
- A person who is accompanied by someone who is at least 18 years old and meets or is exempt from the requirement and who is attendant to the safe operation of the vessel

- A non-resident who has proof of passing a NASBLA–approved course from his home state or
- A person operating a vessel within 90 days after completing an approved boating safety course who has a photographic I.D. and a boater education course completion certificate showing proof of having completed the required boating safety education course. The course completion certificate must provide the student’s first and last name, date of birth and the date the course was successfully completed.



**Permanent Boater Safety Card**

**FLORIDA BOATER EDUCATION  
TEMPORARY CERTIFICATE**

**Contractor Information:**  
 Contractor Number \_\_\_\_\_  
 Company Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_, FL Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
 Contact Person \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone Number (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

The proctor of this test may not provide the person taking the test with any answers and shall prohibit them from being helped by any other person. NOTE: This does not prohibit the proctor from providing general boating safety instruction prior to testing.

Date of Test \_\_\_\_\_  
BOATER'S COPY

( ) PASS ( ) FAIL

**Individual Completing Test** 434393

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_  
 State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Male ( ) Female ( )

	A	B	C	D		A	B	C	D		A	B	C	D
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\* Boater MUST get 18 questions correct to pass

**Temporary Boater Safety Card**

## Don't Forget

- Accidents involving a death, a missing person, an injury requiring medical attention, total loss of vessel or those with damages of \$2,000 or more must be reported. If you are involved in an accident, you must remain at the scene and give assistance to other people involved in the accident, provided it is safe to do so. The number for reporting a boating accident and both resource and boating violations to the FWC is (888) 404-FWCC (3922).
- When you are the “give-way vessel” in a situation, you must take action to keep well away from another vessel. You can do so by stopping, slowing down or changing course. You must always give-way (yield) to anchored or disabled vessels, those involved in commercial fishing, sailing vessels (unless they are passing you) and those vessels restricted in their ability to maneuver, such as large vessels operating in a channel and those involved in towing.

- If you see a red symbol with a white diagonal stripe on a flag or buoy, known as a divers-down flag or buoy, you are required to stay at least 300 feet away in open water and 100 feet away in a river, channel or inlet. You may operate within those distances only if your vessel is running at idle speed. If you snorkel or dive, you must display a divers-down flag or buoy. Be sure to stay close to it!



- Keep in mind the following steering rules. In general, when you have a vessel approaching from your right (starboard) side, you are the give-way vessel and should slow down or change course. When you meet another vessel head-on, stay to the right and prepare to give way. While being overtaken (passed) by another vessel, you must maintain your speed and direction until the other vessel is past you.
- Take a few moments to learn about the environmental concerns in your riding area. Comply with manatee speed zone markers and avoid manatee habitat as much as possible. As a responsible PWC operator, stay away from environmentally sensitive seagrass areas. If you find yourself in a shallow area and your vessel is damaging the seagrass on the bottom, stop the vessel and either drift, walk or pole your way to deeper water.

If you are renting a PWC, the rental operator must make sure you have proper training about the information contained in this booklet. You will also be required to participate in an on-water demonstration and check ride to demonstrate your ability to safely operate the PWC before your rental begins. If the livery operator doesn't go over these items with you, demand he or she does. It may save your life! Also, keep in mind that if you are involved in an accident with a rental vessel, both you and the rental operator are responsible to make sure the accident is reported.

Buoys and waterway markers are like “traffic signals” that help you navigate safely. They also can give you important information about dangerous or controlled areas and tell you the location of the safe channel. The following are some of the most common markers and what you should know about them.

**Lateral Markers:** These red or green markers indicate the edge of a safe channel. The best rule to remember is to keep the red markers on your right when returning from open sea—“Red, Right, Returning.”

“IDLE SPEED- NO WAKE:”These markers indicate areas where you must keep your vessel completely settled in the water and make little or no wake.

“SLOW SPEED – MINIMUM WAKE:” These markers indicate areas where you must keep your boat completely settled in the water with a minimum wake that doesn’t endanger other vessels or waterway users.

“RESUME NORMAL SAFE OPERATION:” These markers identify the point where you may resume a safe speed.



## Extended Or Off-Site Rentals

If you are renting a PWC for an extended period of time or for off-site use, the rental company must make sure you also are trained in the following topics:

- Fueling and ventilation
- Trailering and transporting
- Specific local hazards
- The benefits of filing a float plan

*We have made every effort to make this booklet as complete as possible. We want your boating experience to be safe and fun, so remember that it is your responsibility to operate your vessel safely. Wear your life jacket and safety switch lanyard. Be extremely careful and pay close attention to what’s going on around you. Slow down a little and keep sufficient room between you and other vessels or people. And if you haven’t taken a boating safety course recently, consider taking one. You will be surprised how much you learn.*

*This free booklet is provided by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Division of Law Enforcement, Boating and Waterways Section and paid for by those who have violated Florida’s boating laws. Please check for updates to this publication and other important boating information by visiting our Web site at [www.MyFWC.com/Boating](http://www.MyFWC.com/Boating).*



## It didn't have to end this way.

It was too late to save the young man. In the boating accident he had been thrown from the vessel and wasn't wearing a life jacket. My job was to tell his parents what had happened. Something as simple as a life jacket could have saved their son's life. It didn't have to end this way.



*Based on a real life accident reported by an FWC Law Enforcement officer.*

# Get Your *Permanent* Florida Boating Safety Education Identification Card Today!

Become a better boater ■ Rent boats and PWC without taking the Temporary Certificate test



Good for life!  
Free replacement  
if lost, stolen or  
damaged!

Printed on durable,  
wallet-sized cards.



Courses are available online, in our **How to Boat Smart** course book, and in classrooms. Visit **<http://MyFWC.com/Boating/Safety-Education/Courses>** for available courses!