

On the Water: Oregon sees fewer fatalities in 2022

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Waterways in Oregon continue to draw boaters, kayakers and others seeking recreation.

A new report from the Oregon State Marine Board finds 2022 was a safer boating year than 2020 and 2021, but the number of fatalities is still high.

In 2021, there were 19 recreational boating fatalities, and in 2020, there were 26, which was the highest number since 1993 with 25. 2022 ended with 16 boating fatalities.

“Most of the fatalities came down to people not wearing life jackets,” Oregon Marine Board Boating Safety Program Manager Brian Paulsen said.

Eleven fatalities involved non-motorized boats (i.e., rafts, kayaks, SUPs, a canoe and a sailboat without auxiliary power).

Five of the motorized fatalities included a PWC and smaller open motorboats. Ten victims out of the 16 were not wearing a life jacket.

“Everyone needs to be prepared, no matter where they are boating or how long they’ve been boating,” Paulsen said. “Accidents happen and no one can predict them. Wearing a life jacket will increase your odds of survival.”

Inflatable life jackets are popular with many boaters, but Paulsen says they are not for everyone.

"We investigate incidents where life jackets fail to inflate. What we generally find is that the owner didn't service the life jacket properly or it wasn't armed with a CO2 cartridge," Paulsen said. "Inflatable life jackets are machines that must be tested and maintained."

Every person who uses an inflatable should routinely test it to make sure it's working correctly, according to Paulsen.

"There are also hybrid life jackets available with foam flotation and an inflation mechanism," he said.

"Hybrid life jackets provide immediate flotation if you fall overboard and if you need more flotation for the conditions, you can manually activate the inflation."

Another popular boating trend is stand up paddleboarding. Stand up paddleboarders (SUPs) may not know the importance of wearing the appropriate leash for the water dynamics, according to Paulsen.

The Marine Board and American Canoe Association recommend wearing a quick-release leash on moving water, especially on rivers with obstructions.

Paulsen said a quick-release leash differs from an ankle leash and attaches to the paddler's life jacket.

"For example, if the paddler is on a river with swift current and is unable to paddle away from a strainer in time, they can pull the release mechanism from their life jacket," he said. "This will detach them from the leash which stays with the board so that they won't get entangled. The leash and board may get caught up on the strainer, but the paddler will be able to stay afloat and self-rescue."

SUPs are defined as boats by the US Coast Guard and paddlers are required to carry a properly fitting life jacket and sound-producing device, like a whistle.

"Safety equipment in boating is just like any other activity," Paulsen said. "The right gear at the right time will always be helpful."

The Marine Board and access providers continue to see a diversity of boaters in both motorized and non-motorized watercraft on Oregon's waterways.

"Anyone new to boating is encouraged to take a boating education class to learn about how to be safe through pre-trip planning and preparation," Paulsen said. "Consider joining a club to learn ways to build skills with others and don't boat on waterways that exceed your skill level."

Fatalities occurred in all types of waters in 2022, in all types of watercraft. The average age was 43 years old. Three of the victims were female and 13 were male.

"Before you get on the water, check to see if you have the required and appropriate equipment, check the weather, and always wear a life jacket," Paulsen said. "Safe boating is easy if you take the time for planning and preparation."

Recreational boating data and annual summaries are available from the Marine Board's website.