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Commission pushes for lifejackets mandate

By Bob Frye

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For years in Pennsylvania, motorcyclists were required by law to wear a helmet when on the road.

Now, boaters could be facing something similar.

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's boating advisory board has recommended that the full commission mandate that boaters wear lifejackets when on the water between Nov. 1 and midnight April 30.

The regulation would apply to boaters of all ages in motorboats less than 16 feet in length and in all canoes and kayaks, whether they were underway or at anchor.

The intent of the regulation is to save lives during a dangerous time of year, said Laurel Anders, director of the commission's bureau of boating and access.

There were 1,424 reportable boating accidents in Pennsylvania over the past 15 years, she said, resulting in 187 fatalities. The winter months accounted for 117 of those accidents, or just 8 percent.

But they also accounted for a disproportionate number of fatalities - 45, or 24 percent of the total.

"The springtime is especially deadly," Anders said. "People look outside and they see all of that sunshine and they think 'what a great day to go boating.'

"But what's very deceiving is how cold the water still is from wintertime. Large rivers and large lakes are especially slow to warm up."

Any time the water is colder than 70 degrees, boaters who capsize face the risks associated with cold-water immersion, she said. They get water in their lungs, hyperventilate, lose control of their breathing and lose the ability to swim or even tread water, long before hypothermia takes over, she said.

"Fall into cold water without a personal floatation device and you could drown in the span of a few minutes, often within 10 feet of safety," said Dr. Michael Jacobs in an issue of Wilderness Medicine magazine. "Statistics indicate an incapacitating response that is rapid in onset and prevents individuals from swimming 10 feet to save their lives."

Another contributing factor is likely the type of people who are on the water in winter, said Andy Talento, executive director of the Pittsburgh-based Tri-State Marine Trade Association and a member of the boating advisory board.

"In winter, you're not dealing with the typical boater, but more someone who's a hunter or a kayaker type looking for those high flows in whitewater. And they're not always wearing PFDs (personal floatation devices)," he said.

Pennsylvania has never had a lifejacket regulation tied to a time of year before. But that's not to say this idea is new. Anders said proposals to require boaters to wear lifejackets at certain times have been put forth at least three times before.

In each case, they failed in the face of boater opposition.

Anders, though, said the regulation could save at least a few lives.

"As a state agency, there's only so much we can do to protect people. But this is one regulation where we feel we might be able to have an impact," she said.

Bob Frye can be reached at bfrye@tribweb.com or 724-838-5148.

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