



Conseil canadien de la sécurité nautique
Canadian Safe Boating Council

Will it float? Study Summary

In 2002, the Canadian Safe Boating Council struck a Lifejacket/Personal Flotation Device (PFD) Taskforce to review and develop options concerning increased PFD use for recreational boaters in small craft. In October of that year, the Taskforce contracted with SMARTRISK, to develop a research paper summarizing the best available evidence, pro and con, pertaining to mandatory lifejacket/PFD use.

The Research Paper identified the following key findings, which support the recommendation for mandatory wear.

Drowning rates are extremely high in Canada.

Canada's drowning rate is the rate of the USA, approximately four times higher than in Scotland, seven times higher than in England and 12 times higher than those in France. Yet, Canadian rates were about four times lower versus rates in Finland and Norway.

Wearing a PFD/lifejacket is the most significant risk factor.

Data from Coroner's offices indicates that 89% of persons who drowned while boating were not wearing a lifejacket or PFD and in 31% of cases, PFDs or lifejackets were not even present on the vessel. Almost all of these fatalities are considered predictable and preventable

Cold shock and swimming failure are significant factors and are not understood by many boaters.

The documented effects of sudden unexpected immersion in typical Canadian water conditions, including cold shock, reduced swimming ability and swimming failure are not well understood by the boating public but have been shown to be a major contributing factor in drowning. Research has shown that even excellent swimmers are subject to these serious effects.

Boats less than 6 meters are the target.

The particular concern is the safety of operators and passengers in open recreational pleasure craft less than 6 meters in length, given the higher drowning rates in these vessels.

Wearing is the answernot Carriage

Most victims never intended to be in the water. The current regulation requiring Lifejackets/PFD's in the boat does not consider the lack of time available to put on a lifejacket when needed or the difficulty of donning one in the water.

Perception of risk.

Attitudinal studies indicate that most people do not consider themselves to be at risk due to their perceived swimming ability, boating experience and nearness to shore or availability of lifejackets in the boat. Most drowning occurs within 10 meters of safety.

Behavioral Change Campaigns are Not Enough

Although safety education, social marketing, new flotation products and styles do appear to have improved public attitudes towards wearing PFDs, studies do not indicate that wear behavior has been significantly influenced. In fact, observation studies indicate that only about 21% of boaters wear a lifejacket or PFD while in a vessel, and this includes children and PWC riders both of who have a high wear-rate.

Regulation Has Been Effective in Other Jurisdictions

Regulation has proven to be a necessary and effective strategy to lead to behavioral change in other safety areas such as seat belt laws and bicycle helmet requirements. In both cases, wear rates increased significantly following the institution of a law for mandatory wear.

Legal responsibility

A review of legal decisions, liability and duty of care interpretations indicates that legislation would assist the courts in identifying the balance of passengers' and owners' negligence in incidents of fatality and injury.

Public opinion is positive.

Current research and opinion polls indicate that the public would support mandatory wear legislation and that compliance would be high (84-93%).

Enforcement Issues.

Enforcement stakeholders have indicated that enforcement of wear regulations would be easier than enforcing the current carriage regulations, but resources would be required to quickly obtain effective compliance.

Next Steps

The Canadian Safe Boating Council is approaching organizations involved in boating and/or activities where boats less than 6 meters are being used. By sharing the research findings they hope to increase awareness of the significance and impact of boating related drowning in Canada and to build a consensus among stakeholders to advocate for the required wearing of Lifejackets/PFD's by all operators and passengers in all open recreational vessels, less than 6 meters in length, while underway.

For more information go to www.csbc.ca to download the complete report and a Power Point version of the findings.