2014 Boating Accidents Statistical Report

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Law Enforcement

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2014 FWC Boating Officer of the Year

Officer Timothy (Tim) Shearer was selected as the 2014 Boating Officer of the Year. Tim has served with the FWC for five years. In 2013, he logged many hours of vessel patrol hours focusing on boating safety, manatee protection, boating under the influence (BUI), derelict vessels and fisheries enforcement. He led his assigned area in an initiative aimed at targeting boating safety through BUI enforcement.

In order to better prepare himself, he attended the Advanced Roadside Impairment Detection Enforcement Course and became a Breath Test Operator in order to make himself more of an asset to details targeting boating safety and BUI enforcement.

On March 28, 2014, Tim was on water patrol in the St. John’s River, near the Acosta Bridge in downtown Jacksonville, when he saw a man jump from the bridge. The man fell 90 feet into the water. Within seconds Tim located the man just under the surface of the water. He was able to bring the man to the surface, and radio for assistance. While waiting for backup, the subject, who was conscious and complaining of back pain, started to fight with Tim saying, “Let me die...Let me go...I want to die...” The Fire Rescue vessel arrived and they were able to remove the injured man from the water. Despite his injuries, the man is expected to recover.

Officer Shearer has used pro-active enforcement to save stakeholders and local agencies time and money through his efforts involving at-risk, abandoned and derelict vessels. By identifying these vessels early and making contact with the owners, the vessels are usually brought into compliance. Tim identifies the owners in order to have contact information for any future risks their vessels may pose.

He has the reputation of a true professional and has gained the respect of his co-workers, other law enforcement agencies, stakeholders and the citizens he comes in contact with.

2014 Boating Educator of the Year

Daniel (Dan) Thomas was selected as the 2014 Boating Educator of the Year. Dan has been a dedicated United States Power Squadron (USPS) boating safety instructor for the recreational boating public in the Vero Beach area for over ten years. He has taught several different courses including America’s Boating Course, which is USPS’s NASBLA approved course. He also teaches USPS’s Seamanship Course, Instructor Development Course, and parts of several other courses. In addition, he has taught numerous seminars, including VHF radio, GPS, paddling, knots, and chart reading.

Dan has served as the Squadron Education Officer for the last four years. He has led the educational efforts of 450 members during this time. One of the highlights of Dan’s recent work is his time teaching “hands on” boat training. Dan is one of the few certified instructors for the USPS Practical on the Water Training Program in Florida.

He helped start the Youth Sailing Foundation of Indian River, where he now serves as an assistant leader. The program teaches students ages eight through seventeen how to build and sail boats. The group started with two sailboats and now has 30 boats available for use by the students. Approximately 40 students a year, representing all parts of the community, receive instruction through this program. Over the last several years he has spent thousands of hours (and countless weekends) working and teaching with this project.

Dan not only contributes as an instructor to members of the boating public, but he also teaches other instructors. Dan teaches vessel safety examiners about how to conduct a vessel safety exam safely and properly. Of course, Dan also continues to conduct these vessel safety exams himself as well.

Cover Photo Credit: Officer Jorge Pino, FWC DLE
INTRODUCTION

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), powered by science-based leadership, is committed to creating a sustainable and healthy future for Florida’s fish, wildlife, water and habitat resources. The FWC serves Floridians and visitors alike in a variety of ways, most of which revolve around our mission of managing fish and wildlife resources for their long-term well-being and the benefit of people. The Division of Law Enforcement is perhaps the most visible tool within the FWC’s “tool belt” used to meet its goal of providing healthy resources for safe, satisfied customers.

THE DIVISION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

Roles and Mission
The FWC is the only state agency in Florida with primary responsibility for the management of the state’s fish and wildlife resources. The FWC’s Division of Law Enforcement is tasked with enforcing regulations aimed at protecting and sustaining these resources both for their long-term well-being and the benefit of Florida’s residents and visitors, all the while blending in its unique and specialized public safety role. The Division’s mission is clear: “Protecting Florida’s natural resources and people through proactive and responsive law enforcement services.”

Responsibilities
The FWC Division of Law Enforcement provides protection to those who enjoy Florida’s natural resources, while also enforcing resource protection and boating safety laws. Officers patrol rural, wilderness, inshore and offshore areas, as well as areas where other law enforcement agencies do not routinely patrol. FWC officers have the authority to enforce all the laws of the state and are cross-deputized to enforce federal fisheries and wildlife laws.

In the course of carrying out their broad responsibilities, FWC officers seek every opportunity to educate and introduce Floridians and visitors to the wonders of our state’s wildlife, natural resources and some very important boating safety topics.

The Division also provides general law enforcement services as part of Florida’s statewide emergency response network. Because of our unique jurisdiction and specialized training and equipment, FWC is also charged with protecting the state’s waterways and critical infrastructure during times of heightened security threat levels. As seasoned first responders, our officers are trained to move fast and efficiently where needed.

As we look to the future, we will continue to pursue and apply advances in technology to improve the way we respond to both conservation and general law enforcement incidents. When duty calls, we will always be among the first to respond, providing aid as needed. Until then, natural resource protection and proactive boating safety law enforcement and education are what we do best.

Uniquely prepared
On the water, in the woods and in the air, FWC law enforcement officers are uniquely situated and equipped to identify and respond to illegal activity and promote public safety, particularly in the maritime and wilderness areas.
Intervention equals prevention on the water
FWC officers help to ensure Floridians and visitors are safe when they are on the water. The FWC accomplishes this through proactive law enforcement, initiating boating safety and fisheries inspections and identifying and minimizing potential navigation and environmental hazards in the waterways.

Our Boating and Waterways Section supports officer efforts by coordinating statewide boating safety efforts. Some examples of support are: education campaigns, ensuring waterway markers are accurate and maintained, permitting and marking speed-regulated areas, coordinating initiatives aimed at removing derelict vessels and providing more public boating access sites.

With close to a million vessels, Florida leads the nation in the number of vessels registered in a state. As a negative consequence of high vessel numbers and our mild climate, Florida has the highest number of boating fatalities in the nation annually. The vast size of our inland, coastal and offshore patrol areas – combined with a significant population of avid and diverse boaters – presents a unique and daunting challenge for FWC and our local and federal maritime enforcement partners.

Boating education is critical
The 2014 Boating Accidents Statistical Report indicates there were 634 reportable boating accidents and 73 boating related fatalities in the calendar year. This total includes four missing persons who at the end of 2014 have not been located or accounted for and their circumstances suggest that death or serious injury has occurred. Many of the deaths were due to victims falling overboard and drowning. A large number of the deaths could have been prevented if the victims had worn life jackets. We continue to increase our efforts to reduce the number of boating-related fatalities through education about the importance of wearing life jackets while boating.

Florida’s current boating safety education law only applies to boaters born on or after January 1, 1988 and operating a motorized vessel of 10 horsepower or greater. The face-to-face contacts by FWC officers and our partner agencies are a critical part of our outreach efforts and education to the boating public. These statistics show us that the boat operator most likely to be involved in a boating accident is a middle-age or older male who has boating experience yet has never learned the most important safety considerations by having taken a boating safety course. When officers perform fresh and saltwater resource enforcement activities, they routinely conduct boating safety inspections aimed at both identifying and preventing violations. FWC officers make boating safer and ultimately save lives.

Safe boating is a choice
Florida is the leader in promoting boating accident prevention. The FWC, in association with the National Safe Boating Council, Bombardier Recreational Products Inc., West Marine, and the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), has launched a statewide boating safety campaign as part of a national initiative. The “Wear It Florida” campaign encourages boaters to wear life jackets anytime they are on the water and educates boaters about the ease and convenience of the relatively unknown inflatable life jackets. The campaign reaches the public through a variety of methods including media events, exhibits, personal contacts, radio and televised public service announcements.
ABOUT THIS REPORT

The 2014 Boating Accidents Statistical Report is compiled by the Boating and Waterways Section of the FWC’s Division of Law Enforcement. Most of the data contained in this report is gathered from boating accident investigative reports submitted by FWC officers and our marine law enforcement partners working for Florida law enforcement agencies.

At the end of each calendar year, boating accident data is compiled and assembled into Florida's annual report. The FWC's Boating and Waterways Section analyzes this information and uses it to formulate proactive plans aimed at reducing the number of boating accidents and their related injuries, fatalities and property damage. This information is also reported to the U.S. Coast Guard’s Boating Safety Division in Washington, D.C., to be included in the national database consisting of data from all U.S. states and territories.

The statistics reflect data from “reportable boating accidents” that occurred in our state. Boating accidents must meet at least one of the five criteria below to be classified as reportable:

- A person dies
- A person disappears under circumstances that indicate possible death or injury
- A person receives an injury requiring medical treatment beyond immediate first aid
- There is at least $2,000 aggregate property damage to the vessel(s) or other property
- There is a total loss of a vessel

The number of vessels registered in the State of Florida increased slightly in 2014. With 899,635 registered vessels, Florida leads the nation in registered vessels. Additionally, it is estimated that up to one million non-registered vessels actively use Florida’s waters, and this segment of the boating population appears to still be growing. Our waterways show the strains of congestion as each year brings more residents and visitors together to utilize our abundant water resources and enjoy Florida’s boating lifestyle.
2014 SUMMARY

BOATING ACCIDENT REVIEW

- Florida continues to lead the nation with a total number of 899,635 registered vessels in 2014.
- There were a total of 634 reportable boating accidents in 2014.

REPORTABLE BOATING ACCIDENT

- Collision with vessel was the leading type of accident with a total of 163 (26%).
- Towed watersport activities were involved in 16 accidents, resulting in 17 injuries. PWC were used in three of the 16 accidents.
- Paddlecraft (canoes, kayaks, rowboats) were involved in 19 accidents resulting in 16 fatalities and five injuries.
- May was the month with the highest number of accidents (90).
- Miami-Dade County reported the highest number of accidents and injuries (79 total accidents with 10 fatalities and 47 injuries).

REPORTABLE BOATING FATALITIES

- 64 fatal accidents for 2014 resulting in 73 fatalities.
- 28% of the fatal accidents were falls overboard (18 accidents). Boaters falling overboard remains the main cause of boating fatalities.
- The leading cause of death in fatal boating accidents was drowning 51 (70%).
- The deadliest month in 2014 was July with 17 fatalities.
- Alcohol or drug-use is reported to have played a role in 12% of boating fatalities.
- 86% of the victims of fatal boating accidents were males (63).
- 59% (42) of the 71 operators involved in fatal accidents were age 51 or older.
- 50% (37) of all vessels involved in fatal accidents in 2014 were 16 feet or less in length.

REPORTABLE BOATING INJURIES

- There were 634 accidents resulting in 365 injuries. The rate of injury was 41 injuries per 100,000 registered vessels.

REPORTABLE PERSONAL WATERCRAFT ACCIDENTS

- Personal watercraft (PWC) accounted for 12% of all registered vessels in Florida.
- PWC were involved in 16% (104) of reportable boating accidents.
- Rented PWC represented 50%(75) of PWC involved in accidents.
- 54% of PWC accidents involved a collision with another vessel.
- 45% of PWC accidents occurred in Pinellas (19), Monroe (17) and Miami-Dade (11) counties.
- Five fatalities resulted from the 104 PWC accidents.

BOATING EDUCATION STATISTICS

- FWC issued 38,178 Boating Safety Education ID Cards in 2014.
- 60% of the cards were issued to persons born on or after January 1, 1988.
- Of the 38,178 cards issued, 28,115 were issued to males, 9,919 were issued to females. 144 did not enter their gender. An additional 8,525 cards were printed for lost, damaged and information changes.
- 82% of the operators involved in fatal accidents had no formal boater education.

Boating accident statistics for 2014 were compiled on 2/26/2015. Reports received after that date are not included in the following data. In 2014 there were four missing persons reported. There has not been any updated information as to their status. The four missing persons have been included in the fatality data.