



World Water Safety

INTERNATIONAL LIFE SAVING FEDERATION

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LIFESAVING POSITION STATEMENT - LPS 13

USE OF LIFEJACKETS (PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICES)

PREAMBLE

The International Lifesaving Federation has endorsed the International Lifejacket Wear Principles ^[1] set out below.

“THE PRINCIPLES

Organisations which are signatories to the International Lifejacket Wear Principles agree to the following:

- We recognise the fundamental role the wearing of lifejackets plays in the safeguarding of life for water users;
- We recognise the importance of promoting the wearing of lifejackets when boating;
- We endeavour to ensure that any publication including brochures, DVD, video, websites, and the like will feature all people wearing contemporary style lifejackets when in an outside area of a small craft that is underway;
- We recommend to the recreational boating industry that its publications similarly feature all people shown wearing lifejackets when in an outside area of a small craft³ that is underway;
- We require on-water education and compliance staff to wear lifejackets whenever they are on the water;
- We use the term “lifejacket” in public information and education; and
- We encourage respective boating safety networks to become ‘safety partners’ by supporting the above principles.”

The statement below uses the word “Lifejacket” throughout. This term refers to Personal Floatation Devices (PFD’s) but is the term preferred due to common understanding and usage.

BACKGROUND

Many countries have national standards for floatation devices with various levels of buoyancy, usually expressed in newtons. Sometimes these are referred to as Personal Floatation Devices (PFD’s), life vests, lifejackets and/or buoyancy aids. Sometimes the term ‘lifejacket’ has only

been used to describe a floatation device with a rating of 150 newtons or above as these are generally designed to roll the person onto their back with their head above the water line. The term PFD was then used for floatation devices that would bring a person to the surface of the water but not necessarily ensure that their mouth and nose would be above the water line. The use of different terminology has led to some confusion and it is now recommended that all floatation devices are referred to as lifejackets as this term has common understanding and is in general use.

The important thing to remember is that the lifejacket that is most appropriate to the activity that you are performing is the one selected.

Many deaths by drowning that occur during boating happen to people who do not wear a life jacket. For example, Canada's Lifesaving Society website states that "The drowning report consistently shows data obtained over the past 15 years indicates that 9 out of 10 victims of boating-related drowning were found not wearing a lifejacket". [2]

Evidence supporting lifejacket effectiveness in reducing drowning deaths in boating related incidents was provided in a study of lifejacket use among boaters who ended up in the water following a capsized or from falling into the water. [3] The World Health Organisation (WHO) Global Drowning Report notes that "The findings of a recent study of United States Coast Guard records comparing risk of drowning death for PFD wearers and non-wearers indicated that 50% of recreational boating drowning deaths may be prevented by wearing an appropriate PFD." and "Two Australian states have introduced regulations mandating PFD wearing for recreational boaters. A before-after observational study of the effectiveness of these in one state found the regulations were associated with a significant increase (from 22% to 63%) in PFD wearing." Going onto to state "A subsequent study found the regulations were effective in reducing drowning deaths among all recreational boaters, from 59 recreational boating drowning deaths occurring in the six-year pre-legislation period compared to 16 in the 5-year post legislation period." [4]

While there is evidence to show that the odds of survival increase if lifejackets are worn [5] [6] [7], not many authorities in the world mandate the wearing of lifejackets by law even though they usually mandate the presence of lifejackets on board boats and watercraft. In some jurisdictions, there are circumstances where a lifejacket must be worn (travelling over a coastal bar and for children under a certain age for example) [8] In addition, potential role models such as competitive sailors and lifesavers often do not wear lifejackets. Some lifesavers have even obtained exemptions from wearing lifejackets on account of their role. However, the reality is that having lifejackets available but not requiring them to be worn is not a safe practice. At the time a person needs a lifejacket most, it may be too late e.g. a non-swimmer may have already fallen into the sea or a sailor may have been knocked overboard by a sailing boat's boom.

Authorities in Mississippi (United States) [7] and Victoria (Australia) [6] have mandated the wearing of life jackets and they have seen a reduction of boating related drowning as a consequence. Many states in the U.S.A. now require the wearing of lifejackets by children. There are also some recent calls for having such laws e.g. in May 2010, the Ottawa Provincial Police were asking for such a law to be passed. Like the law in many other places, the current law in Ottawa provides that lifejackets must be in reach of people on board boats but does not mandate that they are to be worn.

The International Lifesaving Federation^[12] and WHO^[8] have both recommended^[12] the use of lifejackets as a primary drowning prevention measure The WHO Global Drowning Report states that "PFD's are considered appropriate for use by children, recreational boaters and water-sports participants undertaking activities in calm waters, close to the

shore or close to help from rescuers”.^[4] In addition, recent open water drowning prevention guidelines from the International Open Water Drowning Prevention Task Force^[13] include recommendations for individuals and those under their care to know how and when to use lifejackets. The United States Coast Guard also recommends boaters to always wear lifejackets while underway on a boat and require their passengers to do the same^{[14][15]}. The Canadian Safe Boating Council also advocates as a best practice the wearing of lifejackets while a recreational craft of 6 metres or less in length (including kayaks, canoes and self-propelled vessels) is underway.

United States auxiliary coastguards have also been urged to set an example by wearing lifejackets when performing a vessel safety check, when teaching and when staffing a boating safety booth^[15]. This is to practice what they teach and also to set the expectation that they wear lifejackets when in the water. All rescuers (including lifesavers and lifeguards) should also set the example by putting on lifejackets when they are on board a boat or other watercraft.

Significant advancement through research into ‘fit for purpose’ lifejackets is occurring which will assist in overcoming the perception of lifejackets being bulky and uncomfortable. Many water related sport activity participants are now being encouraged to wear lifejackets including rock fishing, kayaking and big wave surfing.

STATEMENT

1. Evidence suggests that the wearing of an appropriate lifejacket increases the chances of survival from drowning in an incident involving a boat or other watercraft.
2. Every person on board a boat or other watercraft should wear an approved lifejacket that is appropriate for them.
3. Lifesavers, lifeguards and other rescuers should set the example and also enhance their own safety by putting on lifejackets when they are on board a boat or other watercraft until it is necessary to remove them or unless it interferes with their rescue activities.

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