

Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force Meeting

Date: September 26, 2025 - 9:00 AM
Office of Environmental Risk & Resilience

1. WELCOME AND ATTENDANCE

Chair, Andy Fernandez welcomed Task Force members and emphasized that education is the most effective way to prevent injuries and fatalities on the water. Current data shows that Miami-Dade County led the state with 65 reportable boating accidents in 2024, and Florida recorded 81 fatalities last year, with 65% of those involved lacking any formal boating education or training. These numbers highlight the urgent need for increased public awareness and training.

Attendees were encouraged to use the resources available at miamidade.gov/biscaynebay under the Boater Safety and Bay Education tab. The presence of local leaders and agency representatives reinforced the importance of collaboration in making Biscayne Bay safer for all.

2. APPROVAL OF AGENDA – *Actionable Item*

Chair Andy Fernandez called for approval of the agenda. Agenda approved unanimously.

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES – *Actionable Item*

Chair Andy Fernandez called for approval of the Minutes from the July 10th meeting. Minutes approved unanimously.

4. FLORIDA BOATER SAFETY EDUCATION AND LICENSING

Scott Szczepaniak, Recreational Boating Program Specialist, US Coast Guard Southeast District Prevention Division

- The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and Coast Guard Auxiliary lead nationwide efforts to promote recreational boating safety through education, outreach and strong partnerships. Supporting major events like the Miami International Boat Show, National Safe Boating Week, and Operation Dry Water, their message remains clear: “Boating Safety is job #1.” Working with municipal partners, Sector Miami, Sector Key West, and state agencies like the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC), the Coast Guard strengthens its prevention efforts through formal agreements with every state. Key safety messages include the importance of slowing down, taking early and obvious actions to avoid collisions, and recognizing that both vessels share responsibility on the water.
- The Coast Guard places special emphasis on wearing life jackets – especially inflatable types for comfort – and using the federally mandated engine cut-off switch (kill switch), which many boaters still misunderstand. Education and enforcement are used together to raise awareness. The Auxiliary also runs paddler safety programs to reach the growing number of kayakers and paddleboarders. Operation Dry Water, aimed at reducing boating under the influence, has helped decrease alcohol-related fatalities by 18% since 2009. Through outreach materials, community programs, and ongoing partnerships, the Coast Guard continues to influence safer boating behaviors and encourages everyone to view them as a long-term resource in recreational boating safety.

Task Force member discussion highlights:

- Fernandez asked about Coast Guard campaigns specific to Florida or South Florida. Scott emphasized their focus on continuous improvement and partnering with groups like the Florida Safe Boating League to influence boater behavior. Melwani inquired about fatalities involving fixed objects, to which Scott responded that 15-20% of national boating deaths involve such collisions, often due to speeding or inattention. Fernandez asked about formal agreements, and Scott explained that the Coast Guard handles search and rescue and investigations, especially involving commercial vessels. Estrella raised concerns about limited law enforcement resources, and Scott acknowledged budget constraints but highlighted the sector commander's focus on prioritizing law enforcement. When asked about mobilizing the Coast Guard Auxiliary to help, Scott confirmed they have long been involved and that he works to build strong relationships to maximize their effectiveness.

Brian Rehwinkel, Boating Education and Outreach Coordinator, Boating and Waterways Division, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

- Florida's approved boater safety course follows national standards set by the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) and includes state-specific content tailored to Florida's unique waterways and regulations. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) ensures all approved courses are available across all 67 counties. Florida has distinct requirements, such as boating restricted zones and diver-down regulations, which are incorporated into the curriculum. The state continuously promotes boating safety, emphasizing that many operators "don't know what they don't know." With funding between \$400,000 and \$700,000 dedicated to statewide outreach, FWC aims to raise awareness of essential topics like operator awareness (a leading cause of accidents), emergency locator beacons, wake zones, and the legal requirement to wear life jackets.
- FWC's outreach strategy uses a variety of tools to reach boaters where they are most active—on or near the water. This includes geo-targeted messaging at boat ramps to remind users to wear life jackets, point-of-sale ads at fuel stations (especially ethanol-free pumps), and digital campaigns through platforms like iHeartMedia. Efforts are multilingual, including Spanish-language messaging and content. Other outreach tactics include CTV streaming ads, radio spots, magazine ads, and billboards leading to popular boating destinations like the Florida Keys. Messages often combine safety reminders with recruitment for FWC. All of these methods aim to build safe boating habits, particularly encouraging the consistent use of life jackets and raising awareness about the dangers of boating under the influence.

Task Force member discussion highlights:

- Fernandez raised the question of whether the 1988 cutoff date for requiring a boater safety ID card should be updated. Brian explained that while the age requirement has been revisited several times with bills proposed changes depend on legislative action. Accident data shows most incidents involve males aged 36-54, with no direct correlation to the 1988 cutoff. Courses are approved every three years, and efforts continue to encourage education beyond just those

required by law. Media outreach targets broader audiences, including partnerships with local sports teams, but budget limits the extent of campaigns. The challenge remains to engage boat sellers and lenders as key stakeholders in promoting safety education. There are also ongoing efforts to promote newer, more wearable life jackets despite their higher cost, often using holiday sales and discounts. Additionally, questions were raised about collisions with fixed objects like channel markers, and FWC's maintenance efforts and public awareness around these hazards. Fernandez concluded by noting future discussions will include wayfinding improvements.

Major Alberto Maza, Law Enforcement Section Leader, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

- Major Maza expressed strong support for the initiative, commending the effort to address water safety through laws and task forces. They emphasized the importance of collaboration, stating that their organization wants to be involved at every stage and has valuable resources to contribute. Highlighting the need for a clear public safety message, they noted that ensuring safety on the water requires a collective effort, as their investigators are constantly patrolling but cannot manage the responsibility alone.

Task Force member discussion highlights:

- Fernandez asked about “Lucy’s Law,” which imposes stiffer consequences for careless operators on the water, and what the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is doing to promote training and safety. Maza responded that FWC recently held a charter meeting with the Coast Guard to review state and federal laws and is providing mandatory online training for officers countywide to ensure everyone is informed. They are also expanding outreach to local high schools and making sure police officers understand how to apply the new legislation through clear guidelines.

5. BOATER SAFETY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Cecilia Duer, CEO and President, Spirit of America Foundation (virtual)

- The Spirit of America Foundation’s 30-year-old boating education program combines classroom learning with hands-on, on-the-water experience to build confidence, safety awareness, and interest in marine careers among youth. Starting around 6th grade, students complete a state-approved boater safety course and then train with real equipment on various vessels, learning proactive safety protocols and environmental awareness before getting on the water. The curriculum meets national Common Core standards and is adaptable for public, private, and homeschool settings. The program fosters a lifelong safety mindset that spreads to families and communities, with about 25% of participants pursuing marine-related careers. By partnering with local agencies and focusing on fun, engaging education, it helps close safety gaps, shift older boater behavior, and create a sustainable, knowledgeable next generation of boaters.

Task Force member discussion highlights:

- Fernandez asked if students are required to take swim classes to graduate. Cecilia mentioned that Michigan used to have such a requirement but wasn’t sure if it still does. When Fernandez asked if she notices any state that is doing better with boater education, Cecilia noted that she feels like Ohio does a great job and mentioned that she lives there.

6. MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BOATER SAFETY EDUCATION

Nick Estrella, Monica Bruguera Foundation Representative

- The foundation was created in memory of Monica, a 20-year-old whose life was tragically cut short, inspiring her family and friends to turn their grief into a mission to make the water safer for everyone. Since 2013, the foundation has partnered with the Coast Guard to certify over 11,000 students in free and low-cost boating safety courses across Florida. Their efforts focus on removing financial barriers to education, ensuring that entire families—not just individuals—can access lifesaving training. Classes are offered in both English and Spanish, though there's a recognized need to improve outreach to Spanish-speaking communities.
- A key advocate, Henry Cespedes, highlighted the importance of these efforts, stressing that boating education should never be cost-prohibitive. The foundation believes that increased public awareness is critical and should compel more people to take safety seriously—recognizing the problem, admitting when we lack knowledge, and committing to education as responsible members of the boating community. Special thanks were given to Andy and Melissa for their essential role in advancing this mission.

Task Force member discussion highlights:

- Fernandez asked what else is needed to improve boating education, including instructors and venues. Estrella emphasized that public awareness is key, highlighting the need to engage students since without them classes can't happen. While not ideal, online platforms are better than nothing, but the real challenge is fostering a willingness to participate in education. She suggested public awareness campaigns that almost “shame” boaters into taking the necessary courses. Fernandez agreed, noting that part of the Qualified Captain's approach is using this kind of shaming to encourage better boating behavior.

Melissa Fernandez, Lucy Fernandez Foundation

- This testimony emphasized that boating safety is a shared responsibility—not just for operators, but for everyone on board. Just as one wouldn't go hiking without preparation, boating requires awareness and training, especially when responsible for others. The speaker's perspective is deeply personal, rooted in the tragic loss of 17-year-old Lucy, who died in a preventable boating accident in 2022. Her story has since inspired a mission to improve passenger awareness and promote a cultural shift in boating safety. While most safety education focuses on operators, the speaker stressed that passengers, often unaware of the risks, are just as vulnerable—particularly on Florida's congested waterways, where fatal accidents are frequent, and the operator is rarely the one who dies.
- To honor Lucy's legacy, the foundation has launched several initiatives aimed at empowering youth and families through education and engagement. Programs like the BLU Crew and Jr Crew Camp are designed to reach students, families, and communities with interactive learning, service opportunities, and real-world safety training. Over 600 students across six high schools and two state universities have participated. The foundation advocates for materials and messaging that resonate with today's generation, promoting awareness that you don't have to be at the helm to impact safety. Through outreach, storytelling, and events like the Boater Safety Summit, they aim to inspire

responsibility, change mindsets, and ensure that no other family has to suffer a similar loss.

Task Force member discussion highlights:

- Fernandez highlighted that a common theme is the importance of outreach to schools, noting that Madam Mayor is actively involved in promoting swimming and safety programs within schools.

Tommy Salleh, PROS Stewardship Region Manager, Miami-Dade County Parks Recreation and Open Spaces

- The Parks Recreation and Open Spaces (PROS) department oversees six marinas in Miami-Dade County, where demand for water access is strong and marinas often operate at full capacity. In 2023, over 120,000 vessels were launched, reflecting heavy use of these waterways. To promote safety and compliance, renters must follow all federal, state, and local laws, and boat ramp decals are required for year-round ramp access. PROS is actively working to expand marina access and create more opportunities, a key focus given the high demand. Safety initiatives include clear signage to communicate boating rules, life jacket loaner stations for both children and adults, and park rangers who provide hospitality and enforcement. Off-duty sheriff's officers are hired during busy times and holidays to deter unsafe boating, with consistent enforcement by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).
- Direct engagement with boaters is a core strategy, particularly through Boater Engagement Days held in collaboration with the US Coast Guard Auxiliary, combining vessel inspections with outreach efforts. During these events, staff meet boaters face-to-face, distributing life jackets, boater bags, and demonstrating safety equipment like kill switches. Navigational aids, including private aids to navigation (PATONs), are maintained to help ensure safe passage. Together, these efforts foster a strong culture of safety and regulatory compliance in one of Miami-Dade's busiest boating hubs.

Task Force member discussion highlights:

- Fernandez highlighted that one of the biggest challenges in Miami-Dade County is the long waitlist for boat slips—sometimes up to 10 years—and suggested there might be support for requiring proof of passing a boater safety course before granting a slip, which could encourage more people to take the course. Tommy mentioned boat ramp decals and noted that there's strong demand for water access, with ongoing discussions about expanding opportunities for boating and education. He also explained that Boating Engagement Days, usually held on weekends in collaboration with the Coast Guard, involve vessel inspections but aren't widely promoted to the public.
- Simpson raised concerns about enforcement challenges, noting that noncompliant boaters sometimes avoid attention due to limited officer availability, especially during COVID-19. Tommy acknowledged this issue and said enforcement efforts are actively being addressed. Estrella asked if the county would consider enforcing boater safety registration cards regardless of age or date and possibly linking enforcement to slips and boat ramps. Tommy responded that this idea is under consideration and not opposed.

7. MIAMI-DADE COUNTY MAYOR DANIELLA LEVINE CAVA REMARKS

- The Mayor thanked the chair for their leadership and motivation in bringing the group together, especially through tragedy, and noted the encouraging growth in participation since their last meeting. She expressed gratitude for the meaningful conversations that are helping build public awareness and momentum for positive change, which has already resulted in important state-level improvements in accident reduction and enforcement.
- The focus, she emphasized, goes beyond policies—it's about fostering a culture of responsibility on the water. By involving children, modeling safe behavior, and linking safety with environmental stewardship, the movement is growing through collaboration between nonprofits and government agencies. She also acknowledged local efforts, including recent legislation to remove derelict vessels, and shared that she is looking forward to the task force presenting its recommendations to the administration for further action.

8. COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH

Captain Chris Juall, Recreational Boating Safety Specialist, The Qualified Captain

- **The Qualified Captain**, a popular Instagram and YouTube page with a combined social media reach of 196 million subscribers, is leading a pilot effort that could serve as a national model to improve boating safety. Leveraging digital platforms, The Qualified Captain targets especially younger boaters to influence safer on-water behavior while recognizing that social media can sometimes encourage recklessness. Understanding that “shock value sells” but now requires paid promotion, the page promotes mandatory short safety videos tied to boat registration—linked to county databases for certificate tracking—and partners with local celebrities and community figures to create engaging, adaptable content. These efforts are supported by collaborations with the USCG Auxiliary and Power Squadron vessel exams, along with creative outreach like QR-coded safety signs at boat ramps to encourage positive, non-threatening messaging.
- The Qualified Captain highlights critical safety issues such as operator inattention, bow riding (now legal in Florida but still a major hazard), and the underuse of engine cutoff devices and personal flotation devices (PFDs), which are often seen as uncomfortable or uncool. To address this, the page collaborates with local artists, designers, and sports teams to promote more appealing life jackets, emphasizing that “the best life jacket is the one you’re going to wear.” Through social media campaigns, they raise awareness about kill switch usage, bow-riding dangers, and celebrate safe behavior with initiatives like “Safe Boater of the Month.” By sharing after-action reports from high-profile boating incidents, The Qualified Captain educates viewers about real-world consequences and promotes continuous improvement in boating safety culture through education, community engagement, and innovative outreach.
- Task Force discussion highlights:
 - Fernandez asked about successful outreach efforts on the west coast, and Chris responded that he hasn’t seen initiatives as proactive as those here. He highlighted that local school-based education is valuable but often overlooked, with most efforts led by older individuals who tend to exclude younger audiences. Chris emphasized that social media has the widest reach and the greatest impact for boating safety education.

REASONABLE OPPORTUNITY TO BE HEARD:

- **Anthony Reynes – NOAA/ National Weather Service** – One important aspect missing is weather safety, which plays a crucial role in boating safety. It was suggested to

coordinate efforts to incorporate weather safety education, with plans to discuss it further after the meeting.

- **Amanda Di Perna – Debris Free Oceans** – An advocate for Biscayne Bay is deeply concerned about boating accidents caused by inexperienced people on the water. They urge more outreach and partnering with viral channels to spread essential safety education.
- **Aliza Karim – Miami Waterkeeper** - Thank you for hosting; we support boater safety that protects both the environment and the local community. Combining outreach and enforcement efforts, especially around marine debris, could create stronger collaboration and greater impact.
- **Geoffrey Pool – Biscayne Bay Pilots** - Serving Biscayne and Miami River with large commercial vessels, they strongly support recreational boater education. They offer resources on safely interacting with commercial traffic and are eager to collaborate.

9. TASK FORCE MEMBER DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Fernandez provided a high-level recap ahead of sharing recommendations with the mayor, emphasizing ongoing heavy campaigns and outreach on boater safety, including lifejacket promotions by Madam Mayor. He suggested expanding social media advertising with FWC and requiring anyone renting a county slip to show proof of a boater safety ID card, as well as introducing boater safety education programs in schools to engage future boaters.
- Simpson stressed the need for bold, sometimes provocative campaigns using shock value and billboards to change behaviors, while Estrella noted that public service announcements (PSAs) can be done at no cost if done in partnership with the county. Fernandez highlighted opportunities for high-visibility advertising, such as billboards at Miami airport and public transit, encouraging task force members to send suggestions for upcoming meetings and speakers. Task force members noted media partners have funds for PSAs and would support no-cost county initiatives.

For more information and updates on the Boater Safety and Biscayne Bay Education Task Force, visit: www.miamidade.gov/biscaynebay