

Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force Meeting

Date: October 16, 2025 - 9:00 AM

Department of Environmental Resources Management

1. WELCOME AND ATTENDANCE

Chairman, Andy Fernandez opened the meeting by thanking attendees for their dedication to improving safety on Biscayne Bay, emphasizing that their work has the power to save lives. The focus of the meeting was on law enforcement's role in reducing accidents through stronger enforcement of existing laws—what Chairman Fernandez called “compliance through enforcement”—and on improving how agencies respond and coordinate after accidents occur. He stressed the importance of identifying obstacles faced by law enforcement, addressing gaps rather than celebrating successes, and making both short-term and long-term recommendations to create real cultural change. Chairman Fernandez also rejected the notion that his generation is a “lost generation,” insisting they can lead transformative safety efforts just as past movements did. He called on the task force to be bold, creative, and practical in developing recommendations that change behavior and save lives.

State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle expressed gratitude for being included on the task force and commended Andy and Melissa Fernandez for their courage in turning personal tragedy into purpose. She thanked the Mayor, Commissioner Steinberg, law enforcement, and others involved, emphasizing the importance of keeping Miami's waterways safe, given their value to the community for the economy, tourism, and recreation. Rundle highlighted growing safety concerns due to uneducated or careless boaters, unlicensed operators, and inadequate regulations compared to roadways. She noted the dangers of boating—such as the lack of seatbelts, brakes, or airbags—and the resulting strain on law enforcement dealing with serious injuries and fatalities. She concluded by voicing full support for stronger education, rules, accountability, and safety measures to prevent further tragedies on the water.

Miami-Dade County Commissioner Micky Steinberg expressed her gratitude for being part of the meeting and emphasized her ongoing commitment to boating safety and waterway protection in her coastal Miami-Dade district. She highlighted her legislative efforts to address issues such as illegal jet ski rentals, noise ordinances, and unsafe boating practices—what she called “pirates on the waterway.” Steinberg compared the waterways to highways that lack proper rules and enforcement, stressing the need for stronger regulation and support for law enforcement. She thanked the Mayor and the task force for their focus on these challenges and pledged to continue sponsoring local legislation and providing whatever assistance is needed to improve safety and accountability on the water.

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 September 26th meeting. Minutes approved unanimously.

4. MUNICIPAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

Lt. Michael Barrios, Special Patrol Bureau/ Marine Patrol Unit, Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office (virtual)

- Lieutenant Michael Barrios provided an in-depth overview of the Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office Marine Patrol Unit's structure, challenges, and operations. He introduced his team and explained that Marine Patrol officers are selected from within the Sheriff's Office through a rigorous recruitment process emphasizing boating experience, followed by extensive training and a six-month field program. The unit, which covers waterways from Monroe to Broward County, is responsible for marine law enforcement, operating out of three marinas with 21 officers and limited resources. Barrios highlighted ongoing efforts to modernize their electronic citation system through LexisNexis to ensure better data sharing with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). However, he cited funding and staffing shortages as major obstacles, forcing the team to rely on overtime and reactive rather than proactive enforcement.
- He also discussed the unit's collaboration with the State Attorney's Office to ensure judges and prosecutors understand the broader implications of boating violations, especially illegal charter operations, which often tie to uninsured, unsafe, or unlicensed activity. Barrios suggested identifying specific prosecutors and judges knowledgeable about maritime issues to improve accountability. On interagency cooperation, he emphasized strong relationships among local, state, and federal partners, supported by joint training, shared communications, and initiatives like the Maritime Area Security Team (MAST), which fosters collaboration between law enforcement, scientists, and environmental agencies. He underscored the need for better radio coordination, quicker response times, and continued education. Barrios concluded by endorsing stronger penalties, such as linking boating violations to driver's licenses and increasing fines, and called for more visible enforcement and clear signage rather than additional speed restrictions—arguing that cultural change and consistent enforcement are the keys to safer waterways.

Task Force member discussion highlights:

- Chairman Fernandez opened the discussion by addressing a long-standing issue — that many boat operators face little to no consequence after receiving citations. He suggested exploring the idea of creating a specialized judicial unit or assigning specific judges to handle boating violations more effectively. Chairman Fernandez then invited input from State Attorney Fernandez Rundle on how the justice system could better handle these cases.
- Lieutenant Michael Barrios from the Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office reported improved collaboration between law enforcement and prosecutors, thanks to recent joint training efforts. However, he emphasized that continued coordination and accountability are crucial. He estimated that his office alone issues between 2,000 and 3,000 boating citations each year, and that total citations across agencies in Miami-Dade likely double that number.
- State Attorney Fernandez Rundle thanked law enforcement for their work and explained that her office already has a specialized team of prosecutors for serious boating cases involving injuries or fatalities. She supported expanding education for both prosecutors and judges, suggesting that this could be integrated into existing State Attorney training programs. Fernandez Rundle also

expressed interest in developing specialized courts or judicial tracks for boating offenses, similar to how drug or mental health courts operate. She agreed to discuss this proposal further with the chief judge and judicial leadership.

- Commissioner Micky Steinberg echoed these concerns, sharing that she had already spoken with the new chief judge about increasing judicial education on boating violations. She underscored the importance of better communication between judges and law enforcement — not to sway judicial outcomes, but to help judges understand the real-world implications and dangers of boating offenses.
- The conversation then shifted to illegal charters and the importance of land-based enforcement. Mike Simpson proposed supplementing marine patrols by targeting marinas, docks, and private homes where illegal charters often originate. He suggested working with city staff, DERM, and code enforcement agencies to focus on easy-to-address violations like business permits (BTRs) and marine operating permits (MOPs). Simpson argued that stronger coordination on land would relieve marine officers of some enforcement burdens, allowing them to focus on safety operations.
- U.S. Coast Guard representative Jesus Porrata explained that the Coast Guard actively investigates illegal charters and provides national training for law enforcement agencies on the issue. He described South Florida as a national model for interagency cooperation but noted ongoing challenges: many operators simply treat civil fines as a business expense. Porrata called for harsher penalties and criminal charges, noting that illegal charters are highly profitable, persistent, and sometimes tied to other criminal activity.
- Lt. Barrios followed up by describing the existing multi-agency enforcement model: the Sheriff's Office addresses state violations, the Coast Guard handles federal ones, and reports are shared with Miami-Dade's Regulatory and Economic Resources department (RER) for follow-up against noncompliant marinas. He identified Chamonet Marina as a frequent hotspot for illegal charter activity and supported the idea of coordinated land-based operations, with code enforcement stationed at marinas to intervene as illegal charters return.
- Coast Guard Lt. JG Lung added that while his division primarily focuses on drug and human trafficking, it regularly collaborates with FWC and local agencies to improve overall boating safety. Finally, task force member Larry summarized the emerging consensus: one of the group's formal recommendations should be to strengthen **land-based enforcement** efforts that prevent illegal charters before they even reach the water.
- The discussion shifted to discuss the county's transition to an electronic ticketing (e-ticket) system. Chairman Fernandez raised concerns about reported issues with the LexisNexis platform and asked for updates on its progress. Chairman Fernandez questioned whether the task force could make formal recommendations to help resolve the system's problems and wondered why Miami-Dade didn't simply adopt the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) existing and proven system. He emphasized the need to re-examine the county's technology choices, suggesting that the issue be elevated to the mayor and county commissioners for review.

- Lieutenant Michael Barrios from the Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office confirmed that the e-ticket system is still in its infancy — “barely learning how to walk.” Weekly meetings are held between LexisNexis, county IT, and other departments, but progress remains slow. The ticket design and data integration are incomplete, and Barrios described the effort as “reinventing the wheel.” He expressed doubts about the system's long-term viability and revealed that his agency is already preparing for the possibility of failure. Barrios stated a preference for switching to FWC's established statewide e-ticket system but explained that, for now, MDSO must continue with LexisNexis until given approval to change.
- Task force member Abad asked how boating accident jurisdiction is determined between Miami-Dade, FWC, and the U.S. Coast Guard. Lt. Barrios outlined the jurisdictional thresholds: the Sheriff's Office handles minor accidents involving no injuries and damages under \$2,000, while FWC takes over all cases involving injuries or fatalities. The Coast Guard, he explained, handles commercial vessel accidents. Barrios added that in fatal cases, all agencies respond, but the investigation ultimately falls under FWC or the Coast Guard's authority.
- FWC's Captain Almagro further clarified that state law requires self-reporting of accidents under \$2,000 in damages, while accidents exceeding that amount or involving injuries/fatalities trigger full FWC investigations. Major Maza expanded on this, explaining that FWC officers receive specialized NASBLA Level 1 and Level 2 training to handle serious accidents and fatalities. He also noted that FWC uses advanced tools, including Faro 3D vessel scanning, to reconstruct collisions — a capability that distinguishes the agency from local law enforcement.
- Abad questioned how FWC consolidates citation data when Miami-Dade still relies on paper tickets. Major Maza responded that while FWC attempts to compile all citation data, the process is slowed by the county's outdated paper-based system. He stressed the importance of system integration across jurisdictions to identify repeat offenders and ensure consistent enforcement. Major Maza explained that FWC uses **SmartCOP**, a statewide paid system that instantly transmits electronic citations, while Miami-Dade's **LexisNexis** system — though free — is incompatible and far less functional.
- State Attorney Fernandez Rundle asked whether other Florida counties manage citations and judicial processing more effectively. Lt. Barrios replied that several counties operate more smoothly because they use shared systems and have smaller caseloads. Major Maza provided specific examples: Monroe County enforces stronger accountability measures, such as suspending boating and fishing privileges for certain violations, while Ocala and Collier County have dedicated judges and prosecutors for boating and resource cases. He emphasized, however, that Miami-Dade's sheer scale — with over 3 million residents and 90,000 registered vessels — makes such specialization more challenging, though it remains both necessary and worth pursuing.

5. STATE LAW ENFORCEMENT

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

- Major Alberto Maza, regional commander for Miami-Dade, Monroe, and Broward Counties, oversees ~120 personnel out of 900 sworn FWC officers statewide. In Miami-Dade, FWC has 63 positions, balancing boating patrols with a wide range of wildlife and public safety duties. Officers undergo a 7-month academy plus field training, including boating accident investigation, and the region now has 14 investigators handling critical boating incidents—a significant increase from past years.
- FWC has strengthened communication with the State Attorney’s Office and local partners, improving coordination across 18 municipalities. Key challenges remain: inconsistent citation processing and outdated radio communications, which could be resolved through unified systems. Overall, Major Maza emphasizes strong teamwork and continuous improvement while highlighting remaining operational gaps.
- FWC has improved radio communication on the water but still needs a fully integrated system. Most Miami-Dade officers focus on the eastern part of the county (Biscayne Bay), with very few patrolling the western areas. Investigations and patrol are separate divisions: 14 investigators, 2 lieutenants, and 1 captain handle critical incidents like serious boating accidents, wildlife attacks, captive wildlife violations, and illegal animal trade. Investigators are now more numerous and trained, sometimes patrolling alongside officers and responding quickly to incidents.
- In Miami-Dade, there are 39 marine officer positions, with 34 dedicated to water patrol but currently 12 vacancies. They operate 20–21 vessels ranging from 12–41 feet. Recruitment has shifted to focus on local South Florida applicants to reduce turnover and ensure familiarity with the area. This approach, combined with recent pay raises, has resulted in a surplus of qualified local applicants for academy positions, marking the first time FWC has had more applicants than available positions in the region.

Task Force member discussion highlights:

- Abad asked how many units are deployed in Miami-Dade on peak boating days.
- Captain Almagro explained that typically on a Saturday there are two squads (morning and afternoon) operating from around 7–8 a.m. to 11 p.m., with one supervisor and five water units patrolling the waterways, plus one inland unit for western areas. This totals six units, with five actively on the water. Ideally, he would like 4–5 units covering each of the north, central, and southern parts of the county—about double the current capacity.
- State Attorney Fernandez Rundle clarified that each unit is a patrol officer in a boat, usually paired, and asked what would be needed for effective coverage. Captain Almagro reiterated the need to double units to cover all waterways efficiently.
- Abad confirmed that there are currently 12 vacant positions out of 34 water officer roles. Captain Almagro explained the vacancies fluctuate due to promotions, transfers, and new academy graduates.
- Major Maza added that FWC has successfully lobbied the legislature to allocate more positions to Miami-Dade, increasing total FTEs to 63, including patrol and investigative staff. He emphasized the importance of assigning positions to areas with the greatest need, like Miami-Dade.
- Captain Almagro described operational priorities: weekends are focused on boating safety in high-traffic areas like Marine Stadium, Picnic Island, and Main Ship Channel, while weekdays involve offshore patrol, fisheries, and supporting national parks or intercoastal units. Extra boats improve response times, reduce officer fatigue, and allow simultaneous operations.
- Major Maza emphasized officer flexibility: officers may take overtime or be deployed for different missions (e.g., immigration enforcement) while still

contributing to boating safety. Extra boats on busy weekends help manage the workload and maintain morale.

- Abad inquired about overall policing coverage, including the Coast Guard and county units.
- Major Maza acknowledged it's difficult to quantify all boats on the water at a given time, since assignments, leave, and local units vary, but they track areas needing support and coordinate accordingly. Captain Almagro suggested it would be valuable to have a comprehensive count of units deployed on peak weekends to understand total coverage.
- State Attorney Fernandez Rundle acknowledged the previous discussion and invited further thoughts.
- Chairman Fernandez asked whether there is formal coordination among agencies before busy weekends, such as communicating about boat/unit coverage across municipalities, or if coordination is mostly informal.
- Captain Almagro responded that coordination happens both formally and informally. He meets with roughly a quarter of the room weekly, and prior to weekends (Thursday or Friday), agencies share information about "hot spots," planned events, or special situations (like a party on an island). They maintain a group chat to communicate in real time, so help can be requested and responded to immediately.
- Mike highlighted the importance of communication in saving lives and asked whether there would be value in creating a formal industry committee that brings together public, private, commercial, and law enforcement entities proactively—without waiting for a tragedy to convene.
- Captain Almagro asked about the "sunset" date of the current board, seeking clarity on its duration.
- Chairman Fernandez explained the current board sunsets in March, but part of its recommendations could include creating a permanent structure.
- Captain Almagro affirmed strong support for a permanent, structured committee, emphasizing that community leaders can make a meaningful difference by collectively lobbying and supporting law enforcement needs.
- The task force discussed a proposal to integrate real-time marine safety alerts into GPS systems like Garmin, functioning similarly to Waze for drivers. The goal is to alert boaters to manatee zones, speed limits, congested sandbars, and other hazards, improving safety and educating inexperienced operators through live, on-screen guidance. Andres Gomez, who introduced the idea, suggested adapting GPS technology to provide alerts for entering or exiting restricted areas. Major Maza (FWC) initially questioned the technical feasibility but later supported the idea, noting that digital alerts could address common complaints about unclear or inconsistent speed zone signage. Albert Gomez, representing the marine industry, explained Garmin's readiness to pilot the system and highlighted additional benefits such as integrating slow-speed zones, seasonal limits, and enforcement overlays. He also noted that GPS systems record data that could serve as "black box" evidence for accountability. State Attorney Fernandez Rundle asked about data preservation and liability use, and Albert confirmed the data could be securely logged and retrieved. Andy supported Garmin's engagement and stressed law enforcement's role in using the system to coordinate operations. Glenn observed that similar alert systems already exist for commercial vessels under whale protection laws and said extending them to recreational boating would improve compliance and safety. Mike and Nancy raised the potential for integrating AIS (Automatic Identification System) data—currently mandatory only for commercial vessels—to enhance vessel tracking, while Captain Almagro explained that Garmin

already logs position and speed every second and that AIS could be incorporated in the future.

- Challenges discussed included inconsistent speed limits, lack of AIS requirements for recreational boats, and the need to standardize regional mapping data for navigation and enforcement. Next steps involve launching a Garmin pilot program, harmonizing agency data, and defining consistent operational norms and speed regulations. Captain Almagro also described how AIS technology broadcasts vessel identity and location via VHF radio, useful for offshore safety and tracking. The Coast Guard Chief reported that the federally mandated Dodge Island slow-speed zone under CFR33 and CFR165 is enforceable, with fines from \$5,000 to over \$117,000. Signage installation awaits funding, but public outreach has begun and full enforcement will start soon. Overall, the discussion emphasized that integrating GPS and AIS technologies could greatly enhance boater education, safety, and accountability while supporting enforcement in key areas like Dodge Island.

6. STATE ATTORNEY KATHERINE FERNANDEZ RUNDLE REMARKS

- State Attorney Fernandez Rundle emphasized that current penalties for violations of navigational rules are too low and largely ineffective, resulting in minimal accountability and insufficient deterrence. She highlighted the need for stronger penalties to prevent accidents and save lives and expressed her intention to synthesize the information from the meeting to revisit proposed legislation from the previous year. The State Attorney intends to work with law enforcement, including the FWC, to develop a legislative package outlining necessary resources, staffing, and budget needs for waterway enforcement. Chairman Fernandez noted the timing was ideal, as the next waterway management meeting could be used to discuss these legislative priorities. He also asked whether navigational infractions currently tie to driver's licenses, which Captain Almagro confirmed they do not. Captain Almagro explained that current penalties include fines ranging from \$500 to \$1,500, and boating privileges may be suspended until the offender completes a mandatory safety course. He praised Lucy's Law for enhancing penalties related to environmental harm, leaving the scene of an accident, and failing to render aid in serious accidents.
- State Attorney Fernandez Rundle supported the idea of tying infractions to mandatory boating courses and ensuring real penalties for non-compliance. She also highlighted that reckless operation causing accidents is now a first-degree misdemeanor with up to one year in jail and a \$1,000 fine, while BUI manslaughter carries a four-year mandatory minimum sentence. Leaving the scene of an accident now carries significant penalties, aligning waterway law with roadway law. Accidents resulting in serious bodily injury are classified as second-degree felonies, punishable by up to five years in prison and a \$5,000 fine, and accidents causing death, including to an unborn child, are now first-degree felonies punishable by up to 30 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. The discussion highlighted the importance of continued collaboration between legal authorities, law enforcement, and legislative sponsors to strengthen enforcement, ensure accountability, and improve safety on waterways.

REASONABLE OPPORTUNITY TO BE HEARD:

- **Melissa Fernandez – Lucy Fernandez Foundation** – The speaker emphasized that enforcement and penalties are ineffective if operators are unaware of the rules, highlighting the need for mandated boating education to ensure proficiency. They called for unified support from agencies to back legislative efforts, stressing that accountability must be paired with proper training to be fair and effective.
- **Federico Fico Fernandez** – Explained that this Task Force was created in response to local waterway tragedies to give the community and law enforcement a shared voice in improving safety. He emphasized collaboration, urging agencies to move from reactive to proactive approaches and to support making the task force a permanent body that drives lasting change.
- **Albert Gomez** - Albert Gomez, co-founder of the Biscayne Bay Marine Health Coalition, emphasized aligning the task force with the Biscayne Bay Commission to access funding and strengthen boating education and environmental protection. He highlighted the need to restore navigation markers to pre-Hurricane Andrew levels and to establish clear speed limit conventions to support upcoming GPS safety technology. Gomez also called for stronger enforcement against illegal boat and jet ski rental operations (“liveries”) by increasing officer presence at ramps and checking permits to prevent deceitful practices. Finally, he announced a stakeholders meeting at the Fort Lauderdale Boat Show to coordinate data sharing with Garmin and accelerate progress on the marine safety initiative.

7. TASK FORCE MEMBER DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Chairman Fernandez opened the discussion by urging members to address the staffing and technology gaps identified by law enforcement, stressing the importance of improving interagency communication, pursuing funding opportunities (including grants), and making bold recommendations—such as upgrading outdated systems or establishing a permanent task force. He also requested that FWC provide detailed staffing and resource data to support advocacy and funding efforts. Larry underscored three core problems: inadequate staffing, weak coordination among agencies, and insufficient funding. Despite these constraints, he praised law enforcement’s performance and noted that better synchronization and response systems could dramatically improve efficiency. Captain Glenn echoed these points, emphasizing the growing strain on limited personnel and equipment amid Miami-Dade’s population boom. He advocated for increased land-based enforcement against illegal charters and public outreach to strengthen respect for marine officers.
- Nick proposed leveraging the Coast Guard Auxiliary as a non-enforcement surveillance arm to expand coverage, suggesting trained volunteers could monitor hotspots and alert on-duty officers. The Coast Guard representative responded that this idea was promising but would require additional funding and formal coordination at the district level. Major Maza from FWC committed to sharing staffing and vessel data, explaining the agency is about 50 officers short and that an upcoming Regional Domestic Security Task Force meeting would help clarify regional enforcement capacity. Abad emphasized advocacy, calling the gap between rising boating accidents and limited enforcement “startling.” He urged gathering data on citations, hotspots, and outcomes to strengthen lobbying efforts in Tallahassee for more funding and policy reform. Mike Simpson proposed separating immediate operational fixes from long-term strategies, urging cities and law enforcement to coordinate on illegal charter enforcement now while also

considering a permanent industry committee to maintain collaboration after the task force sunsets.

- Captain Almagro from FWC described the agency’s broad mission and suggested creating specialized units for boating under the influence, accident investigations, and vessel thefts to increase efficiency. Chairman Fernandez supported this idea and added that similar specialization could benefit the State Attorney’s Office for boating-related cases. Taylor compared waterway conditions to “highways without lanes,” arguing that fines are too lenient for wealthy boaters and that education remains lacking. Recognizing budget constraints, he proposed seeking private and philanthropic funding from insurers, manufacturers, or a new Boating Safety Foundation to supplement enforcement resources.
- In closing, Andy summarized that the meeting produced strong, actionable ideas—focused on creative funding, improved coordination, expanded education, and possibly making the task force permanent. Overall, members agreed that the biggest barriers to boating safety are staffing shortages, poor interagency communication, and lack of funding. The group emphasized integrating better technology, expanding land-based enforcement, improving data collection, and exploring both public and private funding to ensure sustainable, long-term improvements in marine safety.

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