

Memorandum



Date: July 1, 2026

To: Honorable Chairman Anthony Rodriguez
and Members, Board of County Commissioners

From: Daniella Levine Cava *Daniella Levine Cava*
Mayor

Subject: Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force Report and Recommendations

I am pleased to inform you that the Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force Report has been completed. The attached report reflects the extensive work undertaken since my establishment of the Task Force on June 4, 2024, in partnership with the Lucy Fernandez Foundation, following a rise in preventable boating accidents on Biscayne Bay and surrounding waterways. The final report provides a comprehensive overview of the Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force's work to evaluate existing safety practices, review critical data, and develop recommendations to reduce injuries and fatalities across Miami-Dade County's waterways.

Biscayne Bay, which borders nearly every mile of the County and supports 34 municipalities, almost 3 million residents, and an economy generating more than \$64 billion annually, serves as the backdrop for the Task Force's work and underscores the urgency of strengthening protections for all who rely on and enjoy these waters.

Over the course of seven meetings, the Task Force received 16 presentations from local, state, and federal agencies; boating safety educators; nonprofit organizations; maritime industry professionals; and community stakeholders. These presentations addressed accident trends, operator training requirements, enforcement challenges, public outreach efforts, and opportunities for improved interagency coordination. Collectively, they shaped a unified understanding of the systemic issues contributing to preventable tragedies and informed the recommendations now before you.

The attached report outlines a comprehensive strategy built on four essential pillars – boater safety education, law enforcement, legislation and waterway management – forming a framework that prioritizes prevention, accountability, and responsible stewardship. This work was strengthened by the contributions of numerous partners, including law enforcement agencies at every level of government, boating safety educators and nonprofit organizations, maritime industry professionals, members of the public who provided testimony, Miami-Dade County staff, the Lucy Fernandez Foundation, and community partners such as the State Attorney's Office, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the Miami-Dade County Sheriff's Office. Their collaboration was essential in shaping the Task Force's findings and ensuring the recommendations reflect both community needs and operational realities.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to Commissioner Micky Steinberg for her continued participation in the Task Force. She has long been a leader on Biscayne Bay and boater-safety issues, and we look forward to continuing this important work in close partnership with her office.

With the report now finalized, we are prepared to brief your offices on the recommendations in detail and begin planning for implementation pathways in collaboration with relevant agencies. The final report reflects the collective dedication of our community to protecting lives and strengthening safety across Miami-Dade County's waterways. If you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Loren Parra, Director, Department of Environmental Resources Management at Loren.Parra@miamidade.gov.

Attachment: Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force Report and Recommendations

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A SHARED COMMITMENT TO SAFE BOATING FOR A THRIVING BISCAYNE BAY

BOATER SAFETY AND BAY EDUCATION TASK FORCE REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS MAY 2026



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This report is dedicated to Lucy Fernandez, Ella Adler, Monica Burguera,
and all those who have lost their lives on the waters of Biscayne Bay.
May their stories inspire greater awareness, compassion, and change.

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Acknowledgements

The Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force extends its deepest appreciation to the many individuals, organizations, and agencies whose expertise, collaboration, and commitment made this work possible. We are grateful to the local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies; boating safety educators; nonprofit organizations; maritime industry professionals; and members of the public who participated in our meetings and generously shared their knowledge, experiences, and recommendations.



The Task Force also wishes to recognize the invaluable support provided by the staff of Miami-Dade County, including the Office of the Mayor and the Department of Environmental Resources Management, whose guidance and coordination were essential throughout this process.

We offer special thanks to the Lucy Fernandez Foundation and to the families who have transformed personal tragedy into purposeful advocacy. Their courage and dedication have been a driving force behind this Task Force and its mission to prevent future loss of life on our waters.

Finally, we acknowledge State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle's Office, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Miami-Dade County Sheriff's Office, and the many community partners who contributed data, resources, and insights that informed our discussions and strengthened our recommendations.

To all who contributed, whether through testimony, research, partnership, or public engagement, your efforts have helped shape a safer future for everyone who enjoys the waters of Miami-Dade County and the State of Florida.

Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force Mission and Activities

On April 17, 2025, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava established the Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force in partnership with the Lucy Fernandez Foundation, following a rise in preventable boating accidents on Biscayne Bay and surrounding waterways. Biscayne Bay borders virtually every mile of Miami-Dade County, cradling its 34



municipalities and nearly 3 million residents. As an ecological treasure and an economic engine generating more than \$64 billion annually, Biscayne Bay supports extensive recreational use, including boating, fishing, and diving, making boating safety a critical public priority.

The Task Force was convened as an advisory body composed of representatives from the maritime industry, community organizations, and individuals with lived experience. Its charge was to review relevant data, prior reports, and assessments related to boating safety; evaluate existing practices; and develop recommendations to reduce injuries and fatalities across Miami-Dade County's waterways.

The Task Force met seven times and received 16 presentations from local, state, and federal agencies; boating safety experts; nonprofit organizations; and community stakeholders. These presentations addressed accident trends, operator training requirements, enforcement challenges, boater safety education, public outreach, and opportunities for improved interagency coordination. All meetings were publicly noticed and conducted in accordance with Florida's Government in the Sunshine laws.

The work of the Task Force reflects a unified commitment to improving safety, strengthening coordination, and ensuring that boating in Miami-Dade County is safe, responsible, and accessible for all.

Letter from the Mayor

Miami-Dade's waterways are central to both our community's identity and shared way of life. Yet in recent years, we have endured heartbreaking losses, lives cut short in preventable boating accidents. These tragedies have left families grieving and a community searching for answers. They have also strengthened our resolve to take bold, coordinated action to make our waters safer for everyone.

The Task Force was charged with examining the full landscape of boating safety: how we educate operators and passengers, how we enforce existing laws, how legislation can modernize and strengthen safety requirements, and how we manage our waterways to reduce risks. Over the course of seven meetings, members engaged with law enforcement agencies, educators, maritime professionals, and community advocates to identify gaps and develop solutions grounded in data, experience, and compassion.

This report outlines a comprehensive strategy built on four essential pillars: boater education, law enforcement, legislation, and waterway management. Together, these pillars form a framework for a safer future. A future that prioritizes prevention, accountability, and responsible stewardship of our waterways.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to the Task Force members for their thoughtful work and unwavering commitment. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to Melissa and Andy Fernandez and the Lucy Fernandez Foundation, whose advocacy and leadership have been instrumental in driving this effort forward. Their courage and unwavering commitment to change has inspired all of us.

I would also like to recognize Commissioner Micky Steinberg for her active participation and engagement throughout the Task Force. Her leadership and partnership will be critical as we move forward in implementing solutions that enhance safety and protect lives on Miami-Dade County's waterways.

As Mayor, I am committed to ensuring that the recommendations in this report lead to real, measurable improvements. However, Miami-Dade County cannot do this alone; we rely on the continued partnership of local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. We look forward to continuing our close collaboration with them as well as community organizations, and residents to implement these strategies and build a culture of safety on our waters.

This report represents a collaborative effort across agencies, experts, and community members who share a commitment to protecting lives on our waterways. Their dedication

and willingness to confront difficult truths have shaped a roadmap for meaningful and lasting change.

To everyone who contributed to this effort, thank you. Together, we honor the memories of those we have lost by creating a safer, more responsible, and more compassionate boating community for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Mayor Daniella Levine Cava

Miami-Dade County

Letter from the Chair

On behalf of the Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to every member, presenter, agency partner, and community advocate who contributed to this effort. Your expertise, passion, and willingness to engage in honest, sometimes difficult conversations have shaped a body of work that has the potential to save lives and transform boating culture in Miami-Dade County.

This Task Force was created because of tragedies that should never have occurred. My family formed the Lucy Fernandez Foundation after losing our daughter, Lucy, in a preventable boating accident on Labor Day 2022. Since then, other families, including those of Ella Adler and the three young girls lost near Hibiscus Island, have joined us in grief. Their stories, their futures, and their families' unimaginable pain have guided every discussion we have had. Their absence is the reason we came together, and their memory is the reason we must act.

From the outset, our mission was clear: to ensure that no family endures what too many of us have lived through. We approached this work with urgency and a shared belief that meaningful change is not only possible, but necessary.

Throughout our meetings, we examined the realities of boating safety from every angle. We learned that education remains one of the most powerful tools we have, with data showing that a majority of fatal accidents involve operators with no formal training. We also confronted the challenges of enforcement and the need for consistent accountability on the water. We heard from experts about legislative gaps that must be addressed and the importance of thoughtful waterway management to reduce risks and improve navigation.

What emerged from this process is a comprehensive set of recommendations, some that can be implemented immediately, others that will require long-term commitment and collaboration. All are rooted in a simple truth: every life on our waters is worth protecting.

As you read this report, I ask that you keep our purpose at the forefront:

- Every recommendation has the potential to prevent a tragedy.
- Every improvement in education, enforcement, legislation, and waterway management can save a life.
- Every action we take honors those we have lost and protects those still at risk.

Our unified goal has always been clear: to make boating safer for everyone who enjoys the waters of Miami-Dade County and the State of Florida.

Thank you for your dedication, your compassion, and your unwavering commitment to this mission. Together, we have laid the foundation for real and lasting change.

Sincerely,

Andy Fernandez

Chairman, Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force

State of Biscayne Bay

Miami-Dade County's waterways are heavily used and play a central role in the region's cultural, economic, and ecological identity. Biscayne Bay and its surrounding waters support a thriving boating community, a robust maritime economy, and countless recreational opportunities enjoyed by residents and visitors alike. With more than 2.8 million people living in Miami-Dade County and millions more visiting each year, our waterways are central to our identity, our economy, and our quality of life.¹



Yet despite their beauty and importance, our waterways are facing a growing public safety crisis. Miami-Dade County consistently leads the state in boating accidents, and Florida continues to lead the nation in boating fatalities. According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's 2024 Boating Accident Statistical Report², Florida recorded 685 reportable accidents and 81 fatalities, a 37% increase from the previous year. Miami-Dade County remains at the top of these statistics year after year. These numbers are not simply data points, they represent lives lost, families devastated, and tragedies that were overwhelmingly preventable.

A persistent and alarming trend is the lack of formal training among vessel operators. In 2024, 69% of operators involved in fatal accidents had no boating education or training.³ This pattern has remained consistent for years and underscores a critical truth: education is the single most powerful tool we have to prevent accidents and save lives. Without a foundational understanding of navigation rules, channel markers, speed zones, and emergency response, operators are far more likely to make dangerous mistakes.

At the same time, the unique conditions of Biscayne Bay, narrow channels, shifting sandbars, and high vessel density, create an environment where even minor errors can have catastrophic consequences.⁴ The rapid growth of rental and peer-to-peer boating platforms has introduced more inexperienced operators to the water than ever before, often without adequate training or

¹ United States Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/miamidadecountyflorida/POP060210>)

² Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) – 2024 Boating Accident Statistical Report (<https://myfwc.com/boating/safety-education/accidents/>)

³ U.S. Coast Guard Recreational Boating Statistics 2024 (https://uscgboating.org/statistics/accident_statistics.php)

⁴ National Park Service – Biscayne National Park (<https://www.nps.gov/bisc/index.htm>)

oversight. Meanwhile, law enforcement agencies face increasing demands with limited resources, making consistent enforcement of existing laws more challenging.

Just as environmental pressures have pushed Biscayne Bay to a tipping point, behavioral and cultural pressures have pushed boating safety to one as well. Excessive speed, alcohol use, reckless operation, and disregard for navigational rules continue to play a role in many accidents. These behaviors endanger not only vessel operators and passengers but also swimmers, paddlers, divers, and wildlife.

Despite these challenges, meaningful improvement is possible. Other regions have demonstrated that strong education requirements, targeted enforcement, thoughtful legislation, and coordinated waterway management can dramatically reduce accidents and fatalities. Miami-Dade County can achieve similar progress through a unified, sustained, and collaborative approach.

The work of the Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force builds on years of advocacy, community engagement, and agency collaboration. What makes this effort different is its focus on saving lives through a comprehensive, four-pillar strategy:

Boater Safety Education

Education is the foundation of safe boating. Accessible, standardized, and mandatory training for operators and passengers is essential to reducing accidents and building a culture of responsibility on the water.

Law Enforcement

Effective enforcement ensures accountability and reinforces the importance of safe behavior. Strengthening investigative processes, improving interagency coordination, and ensuring consistent enforcement of existing laws are critical to reducing reckless and dangerous operation.

Legislation

Policy change is necessary to modernize safety requirements, close regulatory gaps, and support long-term improvements. Legislative action can establish uniform standards, expand education requirements, and provide the tools needed for effective enforcement.

Waterway Management

Safe waterways require thoughtful planning, clear signage, well-maintained markers, and coordinated management across jurisdictions. Improving waterway design, navigation aids, and traffic patterns can reduce collisions and improve safety for all users.



Biscayne Bay Task Force Watershed and Managed Areas Map

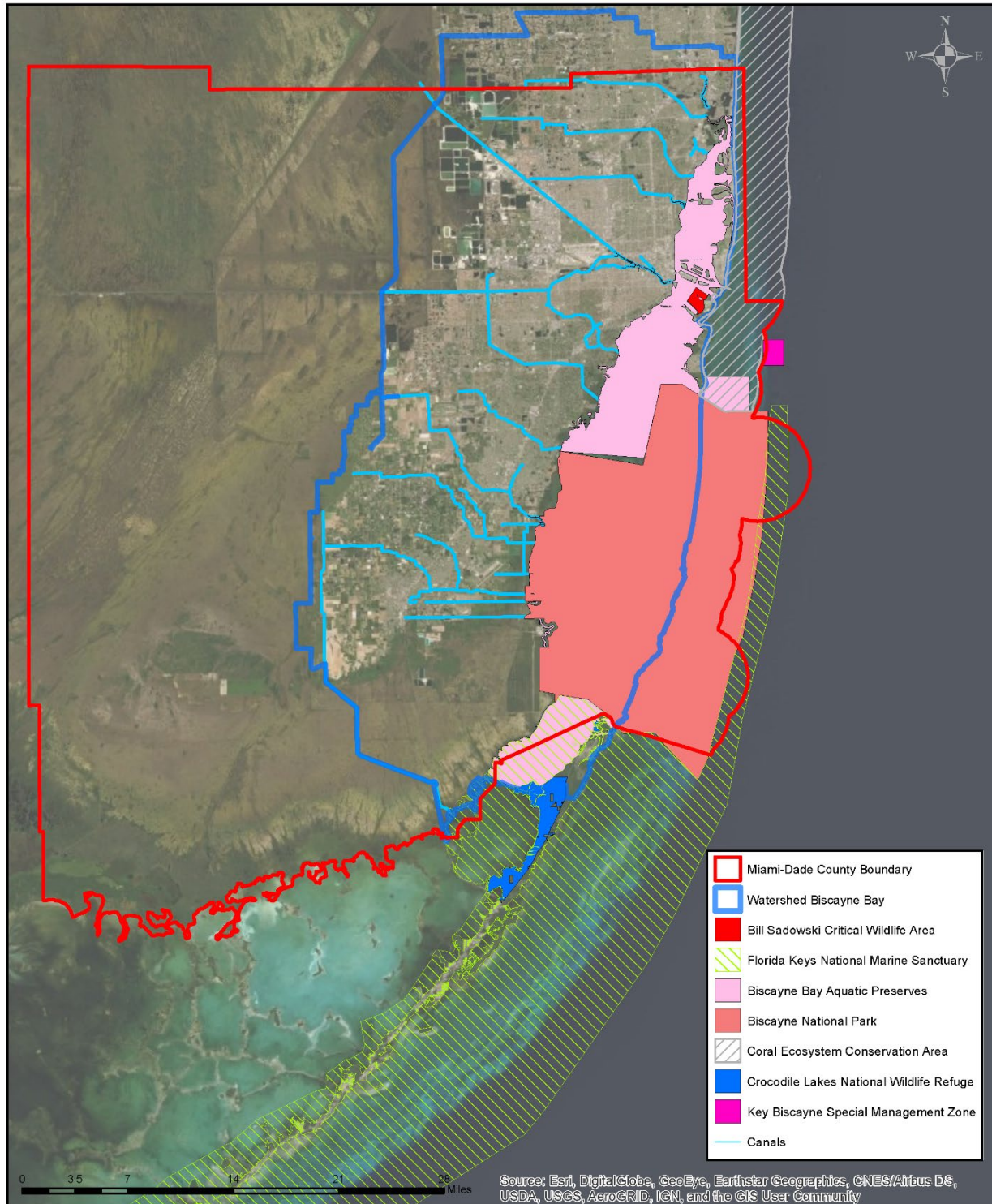


Photo credit: Miami-Dade County DERM

Protected Areas

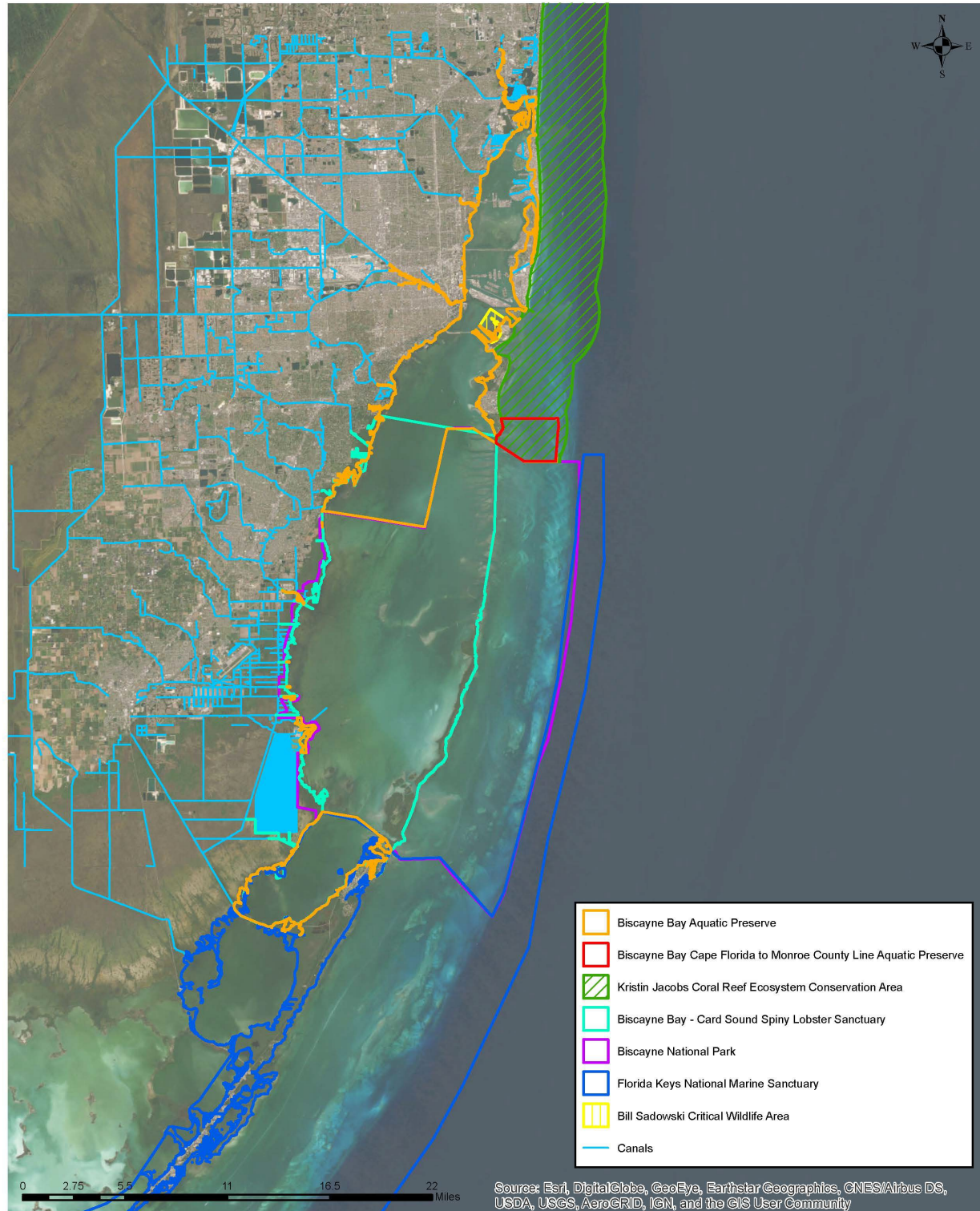


Photo credit: Miami-Dade County DERM

Recommendations

The following section outlines recommendations the County should adopt to improve boater safety in Biscayne Bay. The Task Force recommends establishing an overarching administrative structure to implement these actions across four key themes.

Overarching Recommendations

A unified and collaborative approach to improving boater safety in Biscayne Bay is urgently needed. To enhance safety, protect lives, and support responsible use of the Bay, the Task Force recommends:

1. Establish the Boater Safety and Bay Education Management Board (BSMB)

- Miami-Dade County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) should create a new permanent advisory body called the Boater Safety and Bay Education Management Board (BSMB).
- The BSMB with support from appropriate county staff, technical experts representing various jurisdictions on the Bay, and community members, will strengthen boating safety throughout Biscayne Bay.
- The BSMB will serve as the coordinating entity responsible for tracking the Task Force's recommendations, as outlined in this report, and ensuring they are implemented.
- The BSMB will in addition track emergent issues and future trends related to boating and safety on Biscayne Bay, continuously monitor safety issues, and provide recommendations to address those matters.

2. Create a Marine Enforcement Group

To further enhance on-the-water safety, environmental protection, and regulatory compliance, the Task Force recommends that a dedicated Marine Enforcement Group is established within the County.

This specialized unit should focus on:

- Detecting hazards to navigation
- Locating at-risk and derelict vessels
- Supporting and liaising with marine law enforcement agencies
- Inspecting non-industrial MOP facilities, charter operations, and liveries
- Identifying point sources of surface water pollution
- Removing bulky marine debris

Pillar 1. Boater Safety Education

Boating activity in Biscayne Bay has surged in recent years, bringing more inexperienced operators into one of Florida’s busiest and most environmentally sensitive waterways. According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), Miami-Dade County recorded 73,713 registered recreational vessels in 2024.⁵ Despite this growth, operator inexperience and limited safety training remain among the leading contributors to boating accidents statewide.⁶ The U.S. Coast Guard’s annual *Recreational Boating Statistics* consistently identifies lack of education as a primary factor in collisions and other incidents. This pattern is especially concerning in South Florida, where dense vessel traffic, narrow channels, and rapidly changing weather conditions demand strong navigational skills and situational awareness.



Photo credit: Lucy Fernandez Foundation

Recent tragedies in Biscayne Bay underscore the urgency. So far in 2026, multiple fatal accidents occurred within days of each other, including a hit-and-run collision that killed a father and injured his 14-year-old son, and a separate incident in which a vessel lost control, ejecting two people and resulting in another death. These events highlight how quickly routine outings can turn deadly when boaters are unprepared or unaware of navigation rules, channel markers, or safe operating practices.

Education is one of the most effective tools for preventing these incidents. National data shows that 69% of boating accidents involve operators who have received no formal boater safety instruction⁷, illustrating the direct link between training and safer outcomes. In Florida, where many operators are not required to complete a safety course unless born after 1988, Biscayne Bay continues to see a mix of seasoned captains and first-time recreationists sharing the same crowded waters, making consistent, accessible education essential.⁸

Strengthening boater safety education in Biscayne Bay will not only reduce preventable injuries and fatalities but also protect sensitive marine habitats, improve compliance with navigation rules, and support a culture of responsible recreation. As vessel traffic continues to grow, investing in

⁵ Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) – 2024 Boating Accident Statistical Report <https://myfwc.com/media/avnrmbt/2024-basr-rba.pdf>

⁶ Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) – 2024 Boating Accident Statistical Report <https://myfwc.com/media/vqfn14ll/2024-basr-counties.pdf>

⁷ U.S. Coast Guard Recreational Boating Statistics 2024 (https://uscgboating.org/statistics/accident_statistics.php)

⁸ Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) – 2024 Boating Accident Statistical Report <https://myfwc.com/media/3l4jlvh1/2024-basr-education.pdf>

comprehensive, widely accessible boater education is one of the most impactful steps Miami-Dade County can take to safeguard both people and the Bay itself.

The Task Force recommends that the County:

1A. Establish a comprehensive, multilingual public awareness campaign to improve boater safety across Biscayne Bay.

The County should develop and implement a high-visibility, behavior-change-oriented public awareness campaign modeled after proven national initiatives such as “Click It or Ticket.” This campaign should deploy consistent, impactful messaging across multiple platforms including billboards, airport signage, transit placements, and digital media, to reach both residents and visitors who operate vessels in Biscayne Bay. Social media strategies incorporating attention-grabbing content (similar to the Qualified Captain model) should be designed to effectively engage recreational boaters where they are most active online.

All campaign materials should be produced in English and Spanish to ensure broad accessibility and cultural relevance. The County should leverage existing relationships with local media outlets to secure no-cost public service announcement placements and maximize reach while minimizing expenses. County-owned communication channels and platforms should be fully utilized to amplify messaging and reinforce a consistent, countywide focus on safe and responsible boating.

1B. Leverage technology and digital platforms to deliver targeted, on-demand boater safety education throughout Biscayne Bay.

The County should expand the use of technology-enabled outreach tools to provide accessible, real-time safety information to boaters at key points of decision-making. QR-coded safety signage should be installed at all public boat ramps, linking directly to short-form boater safety videos and other essential educational materials. QR codes should also be deployed in additional high-traffic areas, including marinas, fish-cleaning stations, wash-down areas, and restaurants or markets located on County-managed waterfront property to ensure broad and repeated exposure to safety messaging.

The County should partner with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to implement geo-targeted digital advertising at fuel stations, boat ramps, and other strategic locations during peak boating periods. These targeted messages will reach operators at the moment they are most likely to engage with safety information, reinforcing responsible behavior and reducing the likelihood of accidents. Together, these technology-driven strategies will strengthen the County’s ability to deliver consistent, effective, and timely boater safety education across Biscayne Bay.

1C. Expand community-based engagement programs to strengthen boater safety education across Biscayne Bay.

The County should establish a recurring, community-facing boater safety engagement program built around three interconnected initiatives designed to reach recreational boaters of all experience levels.

The County should expand Boater Engagement Days at public boat ramps and County marinas currently hosted by the Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces Department (PROS). These structured events should include voluntary vessel safety inspection, life-jacket fittings and demonstrations, and hands-on instruction for new and experienced boaters alike. These events provide direct safety education while also serving as visible evidence of the County's commitment to improving safety on Biscayne Bay.

The County should develop a local influencer and community-leader outreach strategy targeting South Florida's boating, outdoor, and lifestyle audiences. Organic social media promotion by trusted local voices is more effective than traditional advertising. Leveraging these voices will expand the reach and credibility of safety messaging.

The County should establish a dedicated beginner boater lane at public County boat ramps, staffed by trained personnel during peak hours and weekends. Boat ramps are among the highest-risk environments for novice boaters; where inexperience is most visible and where preventable accidents frequently occur. A staffed beginner lane transforms the ramp from a point of frustration and risk into a point of education and support. Staff should provide real-time coaching, launch assistance, and safety guidance to inexperienced operators. This initiative signals that the County recognizes, supports, and expects preparedness from new boaters before they enter Biscayne Bay.

1D. Use County Proprietary Authority to Close the Boater Safety Education Gap in Miami-Dade County.

Miami-Dade County should establish a legally defensible mechanism to expand boater safety education requirements to all operators launching from County-owned facilities. Florida Statute § 327.60 preempts local governments from regulating vessel operation directly, and recent state legislation has further limited on-water enforcement capacity. However, the County retains broad authority to manage its own properties and impose reasonable conditions on its use. Leveraging this proprietary authority provides a viable pathway to require safety training without conflicting with state preemption.

The County should develop a Waterways Access Permit that conditions the use of County-owned boat ramps, marinas, and trailer-parking facilities on completion of an approved boater safety course. This requirement would apply only as a condition of accessing County property and not as

a regulation of vessel operation. This falls within the County's established authority to manage its facilities. Miami-Dade already operates a network of public ramps and marinas under a fee-and-permit structure, making the addition of a safety-training requirement administratively straightforward.

This strategy is supported by local accident data, which show a persistent pattern of preventable incidents and fatalities among untrained operators. Expanding safety education to all age groups launching from County facilities would directly address this gap and advance the County's public-safety objectives. Implementation costs can be minimized through philanthropic partnerships that subsidize course fees for residents, ensuring equitable access to required training.

1E. Require Boater Safety Courses for County Marina Slip Holders

Miami-Dade County should require completion of an approved boater safety course as a condition of renting a slip at any County-owned marina. Slip holders must attest that all vessel operators associated with their slip have completed the course. Agreements should include advance consent to safety inspections, with loss of slip privileges for non-compliance.

1F. Require Boater Safety Education for County Boat-Ramp Permits

The County should establish a boat-ramp permit tied to the individual operator, not the vessel, that requires proof of boater safety education and safety-equipment compliance. The permit should include advance consent to safety inspections and leverage the County's proprietary authority over ramps and parking facilities.

1G. Encourage Private Marinas to Adopt Boater-Safety Requirements

Through business licensing requirements, the County should incentivize private marinas to adopt similar boater-safety expectations for their customers, including requiring or promoting completion of approved safety courses.

Pillar 2. Law Enforcement

Marine law enforcement has become a frontline necessity in Biscayne Bay as the Bay's conditions, vessel activity, and enforcement demands have evolved beyond what traditional patrol models were designed to handle. Agencies such as FWC, Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office Marine Patrol, and municipal marine units are now responsible for far more than issuing citations. They are managing derelict vessels, responding to environmental violations, policing unlicensed charters, and navigating an increasingly crowded and complex waterway. Miami-Dade consistently ranks among the top counties in Florida for boating accidents, and FWC reports that collisions involving speeding, alcohol, and failure to maintain proper lookout remain persistent issues.⁹ These patterns require not only presence but specialized, coordinated enforcement capable of rapid response and proactive deterrence. As Biscayne Bay experiences heavier recreational use, larger gatherings at sandbars, and more commercial activity, law enforcement's role has shifted from reactive patrol to comprehensive risk management. Strengthening marine enforcement capacity is essential to maintaining order on the water, protecting sensitive habitats, and ensuring that the Bay remains safe and navigable for all users.



The Task Force recommends that the County:

2A. Establish a Boating Law Enforcement Task Force to strengthen coordinated safety operations across Biscayne Bay.

To unify operational planning, intelligence sharing, and enforcement activities across Miami-Dade's inland and coastal waters, the State Attorney's Office supports the creation of a standing, interagency Boating Law Enforcement Task Force. The Task Force should include representation from the Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), the United States Coast Guard, municipal marine patrol units (including the Miami Police Department and Miami Beach Police Department), and the Dade Chiefs of Police. This recommendation could expand the existing Maritime Area Security Team (MAST) by including a more formal structure for collaboration among agencies that currently operate with overlapping jurisdictions and fragmented communication channels.

⁹ Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) – 2024 Boating Accident Statistical Report (<https://myfwc.com/media/q3pbm5di/2025-basr-rba.pdf>)

The Task Force should be responsible for facilitating both historical and real-time intelligence sharing, coordinating joint enforcement operations, and resolving jurisdictional challenges that impede effective on-water safety oversight. By aligning enforcement priorities and operational strategies, the Task Force will create a unified enforcement presence across the County's waterways.

Expected outcomes include faster and more coordinated responses to incidents, improved situational awareness among agencies, and measurable improvements in safety outcomes across Biscayne Bay and surrounding waterways. This interagency framework will ensure that enforcement resources are deployed strategically and consistently, strengthening the County's overall approach to boating safety.

2B. Implement a unified marine radio communication protocol to improve multi-agency coordination and emergency response.

Develop interoperable radio communications or designate shared marine channels accessible to all agencies participating in the Boating Law Enforcement Task Force. Establishing a unified communication protocol will eliminate barriers that currently slow or complicate coordination during active incidents, joint patrols, and emergency operations on Biscayne Bay and surrounding waterways.

A shared communication framework will enable real-time information exchange, streamline tactical decision-making, and ensure that all responding units, regardless of agency, operate with the same situational awareness. This interoperability is essential for effective multi-agency operations, particularly in high-traffic or high-risk areas where rapid coordination can prevent escalation and save lives.

Expected outcomes include reduced response times, enhanced safety for both the public and officers, and seamless coordination during joint operations. A unified communication protocol will strengthen the County's overall enforcement posture and support a more cohesive, efficient, and effective on-water safety system.

2C. Standardize citation and data-collection systems across all marine enforcement agencies to strengthen accountability and intelligence-driven operations.

The County should adopt a unified citation, reporting, and data-collection system used by all marine enforcement agencies operating within Miami-Dade County. A standardized system will ensure consistent documentation of violations, warnings, and operator information, eliminating the current fragmentation that limits the County's ability to analyze trends, identify repeat offenders, and deploy enforcement resources strategically.

A unified platform will enable comprehensive data analysis across jurisdictions, allowing agencies to identify high-risk waterways and understand peak violation times, operator behavior patterns, and geographic hotspots. Standardized reporting will also support escalation protocols based on the number and severity of repeat offenses and allow agencies to track repeat-offender vessels regardless of where citations are issued.

Expected outcomes include improved identification of high-risk areas, clearer understanding of violation patterns, more efficient and data-driven enforcement deployment, and stronger accountability through consistent documentation and repeat-offender tracking. A unified citation and reporting system is foundational to building a modern, intelligence-driven marine enforcement framework for Miami-Dade County.

2D. Create a countywide boating data clearinghouse to strengthen intelligence-driven safety and enforcement strategies.

The Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office should partner with key law enforcement agencies and with the support of the County to establish and maintain a centralized boating safety data clearinghouse. This repository should aggregate enforcement activity, accident reports, citation and case outcomes, and other relevant operational data from all participating agencies. A unified data system will provide actionable intelligence to support strategy development, trend analysis, and coordinated enforcement planning across Biscayne Bay and surrounding waterways.

A centralized clearinghouse will enhance the ability to deploy resources effectively, identify high-risk locations and behaviors, and evaluate the impact of safety initiatives over time. Consolidated data will also strengthen the County's competitiveness for state and federal grant funding by demonstrating clear needs, measurable outcomes, and a coordinated regional approach.

Expected outcomes include improved long-term planning, more targeted and efficient enforcement operations, and measurable reductions in boating accidents and violations. A countywide data clearinghouse will serve as a foundational tool for evidence-based decision-making and continuous improvement in boating safety.

2E. Apply proven traffic-enforcement strategies to marine operations to deter unsafe and impaired boating.

Law enforcement agencies with jurisdiction over Biscayne Bay should coordinate and adapt established roadway enforcement models to the marine environment to strengthen deterrence, increase compliance, and reduce high-risk behaviors on Biscayne Bay. This approach should include deploying both marked and unmarked enforcement units at high-traffic boat ramps and marinas, particularly during peak boating periods and major holidays such as Memorial Day, Independence Day, Columbus Day, and Labor Day. Agencies should also conduct high-visibility

safety operations and targeted Boating Under the Influence (BUI) enforcement campaigns modeled after successful roadway initiatives.

These strategies are designed to deter reckless and impaired boating, increase compliance with safety equipment and life-jacket requirements, and reinforce the expectation of responsible vessel operation. A more visible and strategically deployed enforcement presence will help shift boater behavior and reduce preventable incidents.

Expected outcomes include measurable reductions in BUI-related incidents, increased compliance with life-jacket and safety-equipment regulations, and overall improvements in safety across Miami-Dade County waterways.

2F. Establish a specialized boating court process to ensure consistent adjudication and strengthen accountability.

The County should create a dedicated boating court calendar or appoint a designated liaison within the Miami-Dade judicial system to oversee the processing of boating-related violations. A specialized structure will promote consistency in how citations, infractions, and related cases are adjudicated, ensuring that penalties are applied uniformly and in alignment with the County's broader boating safety objectives.

A dedicated judicial pathway will also improve understanding of marine laws among judges, prosecutors, defense counsel, and other stakeholders, reducing variability in case outcomes and strengthening the overall effectiveness of enforcement efforts. By centralizing expertise and standardizing procedures, the County can enhance accountability for unsafe boating behaviors and reinforce the deterrent effect of consistent, predictable penalties.

Expected outcomes include uniform handling of citations, increased accountability for violators, and stronger deterrence through consistent and transparent judicial processes. A specialized boating court process will support a more coherent and effective countywide boating safety system.

2G. Target illegal land-based charter operations through coordinated enforcement and digital monitoring.

The County should develop a coordinated enforcement strategy led by land-based units from the Department of Environmental Resources Management, Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office and municipal police departments to identify and shut down illegal charter operations originating from marinas, private docks. These unlicensed operators often bypass safety, insurance, and training requirements, placing passengers at significant risk and undermining legitimate charter businesses.

The enforcement strategy should include surveillance and undercover operations at known hotspots, coordinated actions with federal and state regulatory agencies, and continuous monitoring of digital platforms where illegal charters frequently advertise. By focusing on land-based points of origin where operators load passengers, collect payments, and stage vessels, the County can intervene before unsafe vessels reach the water.

Expected outcomes include increased passenger safety, a reduction in illegal and uninsured charter operations, and stronger protections for compliant, law-abiding charter businesses. A targeted, multi-agency approach will help restore fairness in the marketplace and reduce preventable safety risks across Miami-Dade waterways.

2H. Review and Improve County Business Tax Receipt (BTR) Process for Marine Related Businesses

The County should conduct an audit of all existing Business Tax Receipts (BTRs) issued to marine-related businesses to ensure the application information is complete, accurate, and not misleading. This review should verify that the business address listed on the BTR is legal and an authorized location for conducting business activities.

As part of this effort, the County should evaluate opportunities to strengthen the BTR application process by requiring more detailed information from applicants. The County should also consider implementing a two-step approval process under which applicants must first obtain County approval before applying for a municipal BTR. Requiring proof of liability insurance as a condition of obtaining a BTR should also be considered.

In addition, the County should increase review and enforcement of Marine Operating Permits (MOPs), including monitoring compliance with permit conditions such as limits on the number of vessels authorized at a facility. The County should work with municipal zoning authorities to improve enforcement against unauthorized marine-related commercial activities occurring on waterfront residential properties.

Finally, the County should strengthen penalties and enforcement measures for unauthorized marine-related commercial activities and violations of MOP requirements.

2I. Establish Permanent Funding Sources for Marine Enforcement

Once established, the Boater Safety and Bay Education Management Board should identify permanent and alternative funding sources to support and expand marine enforcement capacity. Sustained funding for staffing, equipment, and patrol operations is essential to maintaining a consistent enforcement presence, deterring unsafe boating behavior, addressing illegal charter operations, and improving compliance with regulations throughout Miami-Dade County's waterways.

Pillar 3. Legislation

Modernizing legislation for Biscayne Bay has become essential as existing state and local laws no longer reflect the scale, speed, or complexity of today's boating environment. Many of the statutes governing vessel operation, rental liveries, navigational zones, and derelict vessel management were written for a very different era, long before the explosive growth in recreational boating, the rise of app-based rentals, or the environmental pressures facing Biscayne Bay.



FWC's statewide data shows continued increases in vessel registrations, rental-related incidents, and collisions in high-traffic waterways, trends that expose gaps in outdated regulatory frameworks.¹⁰In Biscayne Bay, these gaps translate into inconsistent rules across jurisdictions, limited authority to manage high-risk areas, and slow processes for addressing derelict or at-risk vessels that threaten both safety and water quality. Updating legislation is not simply a bureaucratic exercise; it is the mechanism that gives agencies the tools, authority, and clarity they need to manage a rapidly changing waterway. Stronger, modernized laws will allow Miami-Dade County and state partners to set enforceable standards, regulate emerging risks, and create a coherent system that protects boaters, supports responsible recreation, and preserves Biscayne Bay for future generations.

The Task Force recommends that the County:

3A. Use County Authority to Expand Boater Safety Requirements and Close Regulatory Gaps

Miami-Dade County should use its proprietary authority, business licensing powers, and judicial partnerships to adopt a comprehensive set of measures that expand boater safety requirements, strengthen compliance, and address regulatory gaps related to vessel operation and charter activity.

In addition to these local actions, the County should also pursue a coordinated state legislative strategy to address issues that exceed local authority or require statutory clarification. Several of the regulatory gaps identified, particularly those involving enforcement authority, uniform safety standards, and the regulation of commercial vessel operations, are governed by state law and cannot be resolved through county action alone.

¹⁰ Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) – 2024 Boating Accident Statistical Report
<https://myfwc.com/media/av/nrmbt/2024-basr-rba.pdf>

To ensure these needs are elevated at the state level, the Mayor should recommend the Board of County Commissioners to consider developing a set of state legislative priorities focused on maritime safety, vessel operations, and charter regulation for inclusion in the County's approved legislative package for the upcoming legislative session. Establishing these priorities would allow the County to advocate for statutory changes that support local enforcement, enhance safety requirements, and create a more consistent regulatory framework across Florida's coastal jurisdictions. This approach would also strengthen Miami-Dade County's collaborative efforts with state agencies and industry stakeholders while leading to improvements in public safety and protection of waterways statewide.

Pillar 4. Waterway Management

Effective waterway management has become a central challenge in Biscayne Bay as the Bay now supports more users, more vessel types, and more competing demands than at any point in its history. Biscayne Bay's narrow channels, shallow seagrass flats, sandbar gathering zones, and sensitive ecological areas were never designed to accommodate today's volume of recreational boats, commercial



charters, personal watercraft, and rental operations all moving through the same limited space. Without coordinated management, these overlapping uses create congestion, navigation conflicts, habitat damage, and heightened risk during peak weekends and holidays. Rising sea levels, stronger storm events, and ongoing seagrass loss add further complexity, making it harder for agencies to maintain markers and protect critical habitats. Waterway management is no longer just about placing channel markers. It requires strategic planning, real-time coordination, and adaptive management to balance safety, access, and environmental protection. As Biscayne Bay continues to evolve, a unified approach to managing its waterways is essential to ensure that the Bay remains functional, resilient, and safe for all who depend on it.

The Task Force recommends that the County:

4A. Commission a comprehensive vessel congestion study and revisit the findings of the 2024 North Bay Report.

The County should immediately initiate a formal vessel congestion study to provide the evidentiary foundation required to impose speed limits, restricted-use areas, or other safety measures in high-risk boating zones. Accident trends in congested areas, including North Bay, Matheson Hammock, Haulover Inlet, Nixon Beach, and Marine Stadium, have not improved, and preventable injuries continue to occur despite prior recommendations.

In 2024, the Board of County Commissioners commissioned a study of the North Bay area to determine whether year-round boating-restricted zones or speed limits were warranted.¹¹ While the study concluded that increased enforcement would be more effective than new restrictions, it also identified a critical alternative: commissioning a professional vessel congestion study by a

¹¹Miami-Dade County Memo – August 6, 2024 – Report to Conduct a Study to Determine Whether Any Year-round Boating-restricted Areas Should be Established on the Portion of Biscayne Bay North of the MacArthur Causeway until the County Line – Directive 240464- <https://www.miamidade.gov/resources/environment/documents/2026-02-19-boating-restricted-areas.pdf>

qualified maritime firm. Miami-Dade Marine Patrol explicitly stated that they were not equipped to conduct this analysis internally and recommended hiring an outside firm. That recommendation was never implemented.

A formal congestion study is the required evidentiary basis that enables the County to act when congestion-driven risk is documented. Without it, the County's ability to impose safety measures is severely constrained, regardless of enforcement levels or policy direction. Two years have passed since the 2024 report. The enhanced enforcement that was expected to substitute for new restrictions did not materialize, and accidents in these areas continue.

The Task Force recommends that the Mayor direct the appropriate County departments to revisit the 2024 North Bay report, issue a formal directive to commission a vessel congestion study, and solicit proposals from qualified maritime firms. The scope of the study should be expanded beyond North Bay to include all identified high-risk congestion zones. Initiating this process, issuing the directive and soliciting proposals, is low-cost, requires no legislative action, and falls squarely within the County's existing administrative authority.

4B. Restore and standardize navigational markers and conduct a countywide audit of marine signage and mooring infrastructure.

The County should undertake a comprehensive restoration and standardization effort for navigational markers, regulatory signs, and mooring infrastructure across Biscayne Bay. Missing, damaged, or inconsistent markers contribute to operator confusion, unsafe navigation, and preventable accidents particularly in high-traffic or shallow-water areas where clear guidance is essential.

The County should conduct a full audit of existing markers and signage to ensure alignment with state and federal standards, eliminate inconsistencies, and identify locations where additional markers or updated signage are needed. This audit should include channel markers, speed-zone signs, hazard warnings, and informational signage at boat ramps and marinas. Standardization will improve clarity for both resident and visiting boaters and reduce the likelihood of unintentional violations.

The County should also evaluate the condition and placement of mooring fields and associated infrastructure to ensure they meet safety, environmental, and navigational standards. Well-maintained mooring fields reduce anchor damage, improve vessel organization, and support safer overnight and transient use of Biscayne Bay.

Restoring markers, standardizing signage, and ensuring mooring infrastructure is properly maintained will enhance navigational safety, reduce operator confusion, and support more predictable vessel movement throughout Biscayne Bay.

Jurisdiction over navigational markers varies by location and may fall under state, county, or U.S. Coast Guard authority. The County, with support from the BSMB, should identify the responsible agency for each segment of the waterway system. Once clarified, the responsible agencies should jointly deploy vessels along major navigation routes and record GPS coordinates for any markers that are missing, damaged, or inoperable. If necessary, private funding could be used to engage third-party vendors to accelerate this effort.

The audit should begin with the most heavily trafficked corridors in Biscayne Bay. A focused survey, conducted by county, state, or Coast Guard vessels, would create a clear, actionable map of deficiencies. Many existing markers currently state “not for navigational purposes,” which becomes dangerous when those markers are broken, unlit, or misplaced.

This baseline assessment would allow the County to coordinate repairs and replacements efficiently and transparently.

Standardized speed-zone signage must be addressed in tandem with marker restoration. Without reliable physical markers, boaters lack clear information, and some zones do not appear on charts at all.

A January presentation to the Boater Safety Task Force highlighted how speed-zone and marker data can be integrated into GPS systems. Digital navigation tools reflect accurate, real-time information while physical markers are being repaired or replaced.

Nearly all markers will likely require replacement or modernization. While the full restoration may take 5–10 years and require significant funding, it is long overdue and essential for public safety. Beginning with the busiest areas of Biscayne Bay provides a practical, high-impact starting point.

4C. Integrate Illegal-Charter Prevention Protocols into Marina Operations

The County should require private marinas, as a condition of business licensure, to adopt and maintain procedures for identifying, reporting, and removing illegal charter operators from their facilities. These procedures should include verifying that commercial operators maintain the required licenses, permits, and insurance; establishing clear reporting protocols for suspected illegal charter activity; and requiring marina operators to take appropriate corrective action when violations are identified.

The County should also provide guidance and educational materials to marina owners and managers to help them recognize common indicators of illegal charter activity and understand applicable regulatory requirements. Integrating illegal-charter prevention measures into marina operations would strengthen compliance, improve public safety, support legitimate marine businesses, and reduce unsafe, uninsured, and unregulated commercial activity on County waterways.

Conclusion

The Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force completed its work at its final meeting on May 4, 2026. The recommendations contained in this report reflect the collective efforts of the Task Force and the shared commitment of its members to improving boating safety in Miami-Dade County waterways.

While the Task Force's work has concluded, the importance of this mission remains. Continued collaboration among government agencies, law enforcement, educators, industry partners, and the boating community will be essential to advancing these recommendations and promoting a culture of safe and responsible boating. The following section provides a summary of the recommendations advanced by the Task Force.

Overarching Recommendations

1. Establish the Boater Safety and Bay Education Management Board (BSMB)
2. Create a Marine Enforcement Group

Pillar 1. Boater Safety Education

1A. Establish a comprehensive, multilingual public awareness campaign to improve boater safety across Biscayne Bay.

1B. Leverage technology and digital platforms to deliver targeted, on-demand boater safety education throughout Biscayne Bay.

1C. Expand community-based engagement programs to strengthen boater safety education across Biscayne Bay.

1D. Use County Proprietary Authority to Close the Boater Safety Education Gap in Miami-Dade County.

1E. Require Boater Safety Courses for County Marina Slip Holders

1F. Require Boater Safety Education for County Boat-Ramp Permits

1G. Encourage Private Marinas to Adopt Boater-Safety Requirements

Pillar 2. Law Enforcement

2A. Establish a Boating Law Enforcement Task Force to strengthen coordinated safety operations across Biscayne Bay.

2B. Implement a unified marine radio communication protocol to improve multi-agency coordination and emergency response.

2C. Standardize citation and data-collection systems across all marine enforcement agencies to strengthen accountability and intelligence-driven operations.

2D. Create a countywide boating data clearinghouse to strengthen intelligence-driven safety and enforcement strategies.

2E. Apply proven traffic-enforcement strategies to marine operations to deter unsafe and impaired boating.

2F. Establish a specialized boating court process to ensure consistent adjudication and strengthen accountability.

2G. Target illegal land-based charter operations through coordinated enforcement and digital monitoring.

2H. Review and Improve County Business Tax Receipt (BTR) Process for Marine Related Businesses

2I. Establish Permanent Funding Sources for Marine Enforcement

Pillar 3. Legislation

3A. Use County Authority to Expand Boater Safety Requirements and Close Regulatory Gaps

Pillar 4. Waterway Management

4A. Commission a comprehensive vessel congestion study and revisit the findings of the 2024 North Bay Report.

4B. Restore and standardize navigational markers and conduct a countywide audit of marine signage and mooring infrastructure.

4C. Integrate Illegal-Charter Prevention Protocols into Marina Operations.