



Transport Accident
Investigation
Commission

Watchlist 2026

Recreational boating safety

What is the problem?

New Zealand's maritime rules place no obligations on recreational boat users to demonstrate that they understand and practise safe boating behaviour before getting on the water. Recreational boat users are legally required to observe boating rules but are not required to show that they know the rules or have the skills to comply. Neither are they obligated to limit alcohol consumption when in charge of a recreational vessel, even though skippers are responsible for ensuring everyone on board is safe.

What is the solution?

Maritime rules must place some form of obligation on recreational boat users to demonstrate that they understand, and can practise, safe boating behaviour before they are able to skipper recreational craft.

In addition, the recreational boating sector should have in place arrangements to:

- set maximum limits for alcohol
- prohibit people operating recreational craft if they are substance impaired
- prescribe post-occurrence testing requirements for drugs and alcohol.

Strategies to promote safety in New Zealand's recreational boating sector focus on encouraging self-reliance and skipper responsibility through safety awareness and education. The Transport Accident Investigation Commission's view is that the system is flawed because it relies on users knowing the rules, regulations and bylaws, and responsibilities of being a skipper, but does not require them to demonstrate such knowledge before taking a craft on the water or contain any sanctions for being

impaired from drugs or alcohol. The lack of obligations on recreational boat users is anomalous with the aviation and road sectors.

Why are obligations on recreational boats users important?

Safe boating behaviour depends on many things working together. Individuals need to have the knowledge and skills to act appropriately otherwise recreational boat users risk getting themselves, their passengers, or other water users, injured or worse. As well as contributing to an accident, the consumption of alcohol and drugs can be an impediment to survival once people are in the water.

What recommendations have we made?

In 2009, the Commission investigated a recreational boating accident involving a jet-boat and a personal watercraft.¹ Two people died and two were seriously injured. In October 2010, we recommended that the Secretary for Transport:

- recommend rules or some other mechanism that requires the person in charge of a designated recreational craft to hold a licence or certificate that requires them to be appropriately educated to identified standards.²

We repeated the recommendation in May 2023 following an accident in which three people died when a recreational power boat capsized while crossing the Manukau bar.³ We commented that the current educational campaigns provide safety information, but the motivation to learn and apply that knowledge is not levered by any legal compulsion.

A finding from the Manukau bar accident was that it was likely that the skipper's ability and judgement were impaired by alcohol. We have also made repeated recommendations about impairment from drugs and alcohol that have covered recreational boat users: once in 2011 to the Secretary for Transport⁴; and again 2013, in our report into the tragic 2012 Carterton balloon accident in which 11 people died. Our report into that accident called for the introduction of legislation or rules – including in the recreational boating sector – that:

- prescribe allowable maximum levels for alcohol
- prohibit persons from operating craft if they are impaired by drugs
- prescribe post-occurrence testing requirements for drugs and alcohol.⁵

Why is the Commission concerned?

The Commission's view is that the current system is flawed because it relies on users knowing the rules, regulations and bylaws, but does not require them to demonstrate such knowledge. An inquiry into a 2023 collision in the Bay of Islands in which one person was seriously injured reinforced the critical importance of all skippers knowing and adhering to the rules.⁶ Until local bylaws or maritime rules require recreational boat users to acquire and demonstrate knowledge of boating rules, the risk of accidents caused by knowledge-based errors will remain high.

We are also of the view that while there are no legal limits for recreational boat users' substance use or mechanisms for testing, the risk to the public is likely to remain unacceptably high.

References to reports and recommendations

- ¹ MO-2009-201: collision: private jet-boat/private watercraft, Kawarau River, Queenstown, 5 January 2009
[MO-2009-201 | TAIC](#)
- ² MO-2009-201: collision: private jet-boat/private watercraft, Kawarau River, Queenstown, 5 January 2009
[MO-2009-201 | TAIC](#)
Safety recommendation 004/11 rejected
- ³ MO-2021-204: Recreational vessel, capsized and sinking with three fatalities, Manukau Harbour entrance, 16 October 2021
[MO-2021-204 | TAIC](#)
Safety recommendations 002/23 and 003/23 discontinued/rejected
- ⁴ MO-2009-201: collision: private jet-boat/private watercraft, Kawarau River, Queenstown, 5 January 2009
[MO-2009-201 | TAIC](#)
(Superseded) Safety recommendation 005/11
- ⁵ AO-2012-001: Hot-air balloon collision with power lines and in-flight fire, near Carterton, 7 January 2012
[AO-2012-001 | TAIC](#)
Safety recommendation 012/13
- ⁶ MO-2023-202: Collision between Passenger Ferry, Waitere and recreational vessel, Onepoto, off Paihia, Bay of Islands, 13 April 2023
[MO-2023-202 | TAIC](#)

This safety concern was first published as a Watchlist item in 2015.

Te Kōmihana Tirotiro Aitua Waka

Transport Accident Investigation Commission

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