

PERSONAL WATERCRAFT

Personal Watercraft (PWC) are defined by law as “A small vessel which uses an outboard motor or propeller- driven motor, or an inboard motor powering a water jet pump, as its primary source of motive power and which is designed to be operated by a person sitting, standing, or kneeling on, or being towed behind the vessel, rather than in the conventional manner of sitting or standing inside the vessel.” PWCs are commonly known by their manufacturer names such as “Jet Skis” and “Wave Runners.”

It is unlawful to operate a personal watercraft (PWC) on the waters of this State between sunset and sunrise.

Minimum Age To Operate

No person under 14 years of age may operate a personal watercraft (PWC). A person at least 14 years of age but less than 16 years of age may operate a PWC if:

1. The person is accompanied by a person at least 18 years of age who occupies the PWC; or
2. The person possesses ID proof of age and a boating safety certification or card indicating satisfactory completion of a National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) approved boating safety education course.

A person at least 14 years old but less than 16 years old, can operate a PWC if: they are riding with a person who is at least 18 who occupies the PWC and is in compliance with G.S. 75A-16.2; or the youth has first successfully completed a NASBLA approved boating education course (proof of age and safety course completion must be carried by the youth during operation of the PWC.)

ID and boating safety certification must be produced upon request of an officer. It is unlawful for the owner of a PWC or for a person who has temporary or permanent responsibility for a person under 16 to allow that person to operate a PWC except as provided in 1 and 2 above.

Personal Flotation Devices and Safety Equipment

PWCs are subject to the same safety equipment requirements as other vessels. In addition to those requirements:

1. No person shall operate or allow operation of a PWC unless each person riding or being towed is wearing a type I, II, III, or V personal flotation device approved by the US Coast Guard. (Inflatable PFDs do not satisfy this requirement).
2. If the PWC is equipped by the manufacturer with a lanyard-type cut-off switch, it must be attached to the person operating.

Towing Skiers

No person shall operate a PWC towing another person on water skis or other devices unless the PWC has on board, in addition to the operator, an observer who shall monitor the person(s) being towed, or the PWC is equipped with a rear-view mirror; and the total number of persons operating, observing, and being towed does not exceed the number of passengers identified by the manufacturer as the maximum safe load for the vessel.

Reckless Operation

Personal Watercraft must be operated in a reasonable and prudent manner. Maneuvers that endanger life, limb, or property shall constitute reckless operation of a vessel and include:

1. Unreasonably or unnecessarily weaving through congested vessel traffic.
2. Jumping the wake of another vessel within 100 feet of such other vessel or when visibility around such other vessel is obstructed.
3. Intentionally approaching another vessel in order to swerve at the last possible moment to avoid collision.
4. Operating contrary to the "rules of the road" or following too closely to another vessel, including a PWC. "Following too closely," is defined by law as proceeding in the same direction of another vessel and operating at a speed in excess of 10mph when approaching within 100 feet to the rear or 50 feet to the side of another vessel that is underway unless that vessel is operating in a narrow channel, in which case a PWC may operate at the speed and flow of other vessel traffic. A narrow channel is defined as a segment of the waters of the State that is 300 feet or less in width.

Other Operating Restrictions

No person shall operate a personal watercraft on the waters of this State at greater than no-wake speed within 100 feet of an anchored or moored vessel, a dock, pier, swim float, marked swimming area, swimmers, surfers, persons engaged angling, or any manually operated propelled vessel (except within 50 feet in a narrow channel).

Renting Personal Watercraft

Each PWC that is rented to the public is required to have liability insurance in the amount of \$300,000.