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THE HANDBOOK

OF ILLINOIS BOATING LAWS AND RESPONSIBILITIES



2023 Edition

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This handbook includes references to the Illinois Compiled Statutes, Chapter 625—Boat Registration and Safety Act. For example, **625 ILCS 45/5-16** refers to the Illinois Compiled Statutes, Chapter 625, Act 45, Section 5-16.

For federal boating laws, visit the U.S. Coast Guard's boating safety website at www.uscgboating.org.

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Before Going Out

All operators are required to obey laws that regulate your vessel's registration, titling, and operation.

Registering and Titling (625 ILCS 45/3)

- You must have an Illinois Certificate of Number (registration), expiration decals, and Certificate of Title to operate your vessel legally. The only exceptions are:
 - Unpowered vessels, including canoes, kayaks, and paddleboards
 - Vessels owned by the federal or state government
 - Vessels properly registered in another state and using Illinois waters for less than 60 consecutive days
 - Vessels documented with the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and using Illinois waters for less than 60 consecutive days
 - Vessels used solely as lifeboats
 - Vessels registered in other countries temporarily using Illinois waters
 - Vessels used exclusively and solely for racing purposes
- Vessels 21 feet and under in length are not required to have a Certificate of Title.
- Registration is valid for three years. All certificates expire on September 30 at the end of the three-year period.



Where to Title and Register

Watercraft registration application forms are available from dnr.illinois.gov/boating/watercraftapplications.html.

Boaters may renew their vessel registrations:

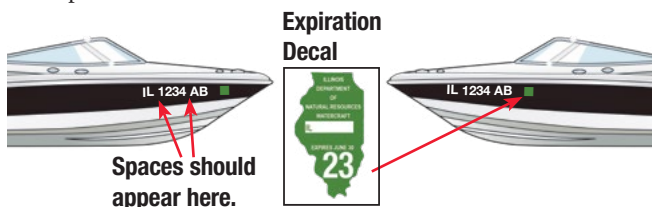
- By calling **1-866-867-3542**
- On the Internet at www.dnr.illinois.gov

Registration Questions?

Call the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR) at **1-800-382-1696** or visit www.dnr.illinois.gov.

- The Certificate of Number (registration card) must be on board and available for inspection by an enforcement officer whenever the vessel is being operated.

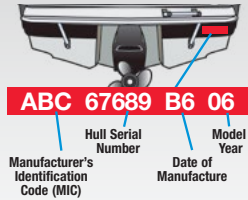
- The registration number and expiration decals must be displayed as follows.
 - Number must be placed on each side of the bow of the vessel.
 - Number must read from left to right on one line, starting with two capital letters—IL—followed by a space and four digits followed by a space and two capital letters, for example: **IL 1234 AB**.
 - Number must be in at least three-inch-high **BLOCK** letters.
 - Number's color must contrast sharply with its background.
 - Decals must be placed on both sides of the bow after a space at the end of the number.



- Unpowered watercraft are not required to obtain Illinois registration numbers.
- Larger recreational vessels owned by U.S. citizens may (at the option of the owner) be documented by the USCG. These vessels are required to display the expiration decal on either side of the documented vessel name.
- The owner of a vessel requiring registration and titling must file a watercraft application with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The application must be signed by the owner and must be accompanied by the required documents and appropriate fee. The required documents are as follows.
 - **New vessels:** The original properly endorsed Manufacturer's Certificate of Origin
 - **Vessels previously registered or titled in another state:** The owner's registration certificate and/or title
 - **Illinois titled vessels:** The owner's Illinois title
- **Warning:** Vessels purchased new or used from out-of-state dealers, manufacturers, or lending institutions are subject to tax. Contact the Illinois Department of Revenue at **1-800-732-8866** for instructions before submitting an application.

Hull Identification Number (HIN) (625 ILCS 45/3-13)

The Hull Identification Number (HIN) is a unique 12-digit number assigned by the manufacturer to vessels built after 1972. These numbers distinguish one vessel from another and are engraved in the fiberglass or on a metal plate attached to the transom. You may not operate a vessel if the HIN has been removed, defaced, or obliterated. You should write down your HIN and put it in a place separate from your vessel in case warranty problems arise or your vessel is stolen.



Who May Operate a Vessel (625 ILCS 45/5-18)

Persons born on or after January 1, 1998, may operate a vessel powered by a motor of more than 10 horsepower (hp) *only if* they have a valid Boating Safety Certificate accepted by the DNR.

- **Persons under the age of 10** may *not* operate any motorized vessel, including personal watercraft (PWC).
- **Persons at least 10 years old but less than 12 years old** may operate a motorized vessel with more than 10 hp, including a PWC, *only if* they are accompanied by and under the direct control of a parent, a guardian, or a person at least 18 years old designated by the parent or guardian.
- **Persons at least 12 years old but less than 18 years old** may operate a motorized vessel with more than 10 hp, including a PWC, *only if*:
 - They complete a boating safety course and possess a Boating Safety Certificate accepted by the DNR *or...*
 - They are accompanied by and under the direct control of a parent, a guardian, or a person at least 18 years old designated by the parent or guardian.
- Parents, guardians, or designees born on or after January 1, 1998, must have a valid boating safety certificate to supervise a person 10 to 17 years old who is operating a motorized vessel with more than 10 hp.

Required Equipment

When preparing to go out on a vessel, the operator must check that the legally required equipment is on board.

Personal Flotation Devices (PFDs) (625 ILCS 45/4-1)

- All vessels must have at least one USCG–approved wearable personal flotation device (PFD), sometimes called life jacket, for each person on board or being towed. All vessels 16 feet or longer, except canoes and kayaks, also must carry one USCG–approved throwable device.
- No person may operate any watercraft unless an approved and appropriately sized wearable USCG–approved PFD is being worn by each person under the age of 13 on the deck of a watercraft or in an open watercraft at all times in which the watercraft is underway. However, this requirement shall not apply to persons who are enclosed in a cabin or below the top deck on a watercraft, on an anchored watercraft that is a platform for swimming or diving, or aboard a charter “passenger for hire” watercraft with a licensed captain.
- If a person chooses to wear a PFD that is not USCG approved (when not specifically required), a properly fitting USCG–approved PFD must be carried on board the vessel to meet the state and federal carriage requirements.
- A PWC or a specialty prop-craft may not be operated unless each person on board is *wearing* a USCG–approved PFD. (Inflatable PFDs are not approved for PWC or prop-craft use.)
- Besides being USCG approved, all PFDs must be:
 - *In good and serviceable condition.*
 - *Readily accessible*, which means you are able to put the PFD on quickly in an emergency.
 - *Of the proper size for the intended wearer.* Sizing for PFDs is based on body weight and chest size.
 - *Legibly marked with the USCG approval number.*

Fire Extinguishers (625 ILCS 45/4-5)

All vessels equipped with an internal combustion engine operating on Illinois waters are required to have at least a USCG–approved fire extinguisher on board.

Backfire Flame Arrestors (625 ILCS 45/4-6)

Because vessel engines may backfire, all powerboats (except outboards) fueled with gasoline must have a USCG–approved (must comply with SAE J-1928 or UL 1111 standards) backfire flame arrestor on each carburetor.

Ventilation Systems (625 ILCS 45/4-7)

Properly installed ventilation systems greatly reduce the chance of a life-threatening explosion. All gasoline-powered vessels, constructed in a way that would entrap fumes, must have at least two ventilation ducts fitted with cowls to remove fumes.

Boat Battery (625 ILCS 45/4-10)

It is unlawful to operate a motorized vessel equipped with a stored battery unless the battery is secured against shifting. The battery must be equipped with non-conductive terminal shields to prevent accidental shorting.

Mufflers and Noise Level Limits (625 ILCS 45/4-3)

- The exhaust of every internal combustion engine on any vessel must be muffled effectively. That is, the engine's exhaust must be muffled or suppressed at all times so as not to create excessive noise.
- It is unlawful to operate a vessel that exceeds a noise level of 90 decibels when subjected to a stationary sound level test or 75 decibels when in operation on state waters.

Engine Cut-Off Switch (ECOS) (625 ILCS 45/4-11)

It is unlawful to operate a motorized vessel, including a PWC or specialty prop-craft, that is equipped with an engine cut-off switch (ECOS) unless the switch is operational and fully functional.

- With a lanyard-type ECOS, the lanyard must be attached to the person, clothing, or PFD of the operator.
- With a wireless cut-off device, the wireless system must be activated.

Sound-Producing Devices (625 ILCS 45/4-4 and 45/4-8)

- On Illinois state waters, all motorized vessels must have a mouth-, hand-, or power-operated whistle or other device capable of producing a blast that is two seconds or more in duration and audible for at least one-half mile.
- No vessel may be equipped with a siren, except law enforcement and emergency vessels.

Visual Distress Signals (VDSs) (625 ILCS 45/4-12)

Vessels on Lake Michigan must be equipped with USCG–approved visual distress signals (VDSs). All vessels are required to carry night signals when operating between sunset and sunrise. Vessels 16 feet long or longer must carry day signals also.

Navigation Lights (625 ILCS 45/4-2 and 45/4-8)

The required navigation lights must be displayed between sunset and sunrise and during periods of restricted visibility.

Power-Driven Vessels When Underway

If less than 65.6 feet long, these vessels must exhibit the lights as shown in illustration 1. Remember, power-driven vessels include sailboats operating under engine power. The required lights are:

- Red and green sidelights visible from a distance of at least two miles away—or if less than 39.4 feet long, at least one mile away—on a dark, clear night.
- An all-round white light or both a masthead light and a sternlight. These lights must be visible from a distance of at least two miles away on a dark, clear night. The all-round white light (or the masthead light) must be at least 3.3 feet higher than the sidelights.

Remember... A vessel or motorboat when underway between sunset and sunrise must have and exhibit USCG-approved navigation lights. No vessel is authorized or permitted to carry any lighting (not required by law) that will interfere with another vessel's ability to distinguish the vessel's navigation lighting.

Unpowered Vessels When Underway

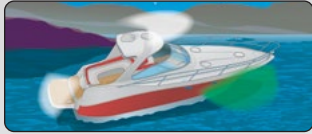
Unpowered vessels are sailboats or vessels that are paddled, poled, or rowed.

- **If less than 65.6 feet long**, these vessels must exhibit the lights as shown in illustration 2. The required lights are:
 - Red and green sidelights visible from at least two miles away—or if less than 39.4 feet long, at least one mile away.
 - A sternlight visible from at least two miles away.
- **If less than 23.0 feet long**, these vessels should:
 - If practical, exhibit the same lights as required for unpowered vessels less than 65.6 feet in length.
 - If not practical, have on hand at least one lantern or flashlight shining a white light as in illustration 3.

All Vessels When Not Underway

All vessels are required to display a white light visible for one mile from all directions whenever they are anchored away from a dock or moored in an area other than a designated mooring area between sunset and sunrise.

1. Power-Driven Vessels Less Than 65.6 Feet



The masthead light and sternlight may be combined as an all-round white light on vessels less than 39.4 feet long.



2. Unpowered Vessels Less Than 65.6 Feet



An alternative to the sidelights and sternlight is a combination red, green, and white light, which must be exhibited near the top of the mast.

3. Unpowered Vessels Less Than 23.0 Feet



Vessel operators should never leave shore without a flashlight. Even if you plan to return before dark, unforeseen developments might delay your return past nightfall.



On the Water

Unlawful Operation (625 ILCS)

Illinois law states that these operating practices are illegal.

- **Careless Operation** (625 ILCS 45/5-1) of a vessel is operating in a careless manner that causes danger to any person or property, or operating at speeds greater than that which allows the operator to bring the vessel to a stop within an assured clear distance ahead.
- **Reckless Operation** (625 ILCS 45/5-2) of a vessel or the reckless manipulation of water skis, a surfboard, or similar device is operating in a manner that causes danger to the life, limb, or property of any person. Examples are:
 - Weaving your vessel through congested waterway traffic
 - Jumping a wake of another vessel unreasonably close or when visibility around the other vessel is obstructed
 - Waiting until the last moment to swerve and avoid collision
 - Operating a vessel in a manner that creates hazardous wave or wake conditions while approaching or passing another boat
- **Overloading or Overpowering** (625 ILCS 45/5-4 and 45/5-6) is operating a vessel that has been loaded beyond the recommended carrying capacity or powered beyond the horsepower limits shown on the capacity plate installed by the vessel manufacturer.
- **Operating in Restricted or “No Wake” Areas** (625 ILCS 45/5-7 and 45/5-12) is not maintaining a proper speed and/or distance while operating a vessel. Specifically, it is illegal to:
 - Operate a vessel within an area that has been clearly marked as a bathing, fishing, swimming, or restricted area.
 - Operate a vessel within 150 feet of a public launching ramp at greater than a **“slow, no wake speed.”**
 - Exceed “slow, no wake speed” in any area marked with buoys or signs as “No Wake.”

“Slow, No Wake Speed” means speed at which the vessel does not produce a wake, not to exceed 5 miles per hour.

- **Riding on Bow or Gunwales** (625 ILCS 45/5-21) is allowing a passenger to ride on the decking over the bow or stern, gunwales, or tops of seat backs of a motorized vessel unless the passenger is within guard rails to prevent falling overboard.

- **Failure to Follow Navigation Rules** (625 ILCS 45/5-13) is not following the navigation rules (listed below).

Navigation Rules

All operators are equally responsible for taking action to avoid collisions. There are two terms that help explain these rules.

- **Stand-on vessel** should maintain its course and speed.
- **Give-way vessel** must take early and substantial action to avoid collision by stopping, slowing down, or changing course.

Power vs. Power



Meeting Head-On

Power vs. Power: Neither vessel is the stand-on vessel. Both vessels should keep to the starboard (right).

Power vs. Sail: The powerboat is the give-way vessel. The sailboat is the stand-on vessel.

Crossing Situations

Power vs. Power: The vessel on the operator's port (left) side is the give-way vessel. The vessel on the operator's starboard (right) side is the stand-on vessel.

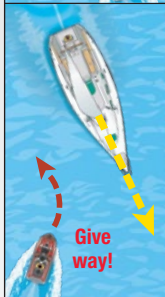
Power vs. Sail: The powerboat is the give-way vessel. The sailboat is the stand-on vessel.

Overtaking

Power vs. Power: The vessel that is overtaking another vessel is the give-way vessel. The vessel being overtaken is the stand-on vessel.

Power vs. Sail: The vessel that is overtaking another vessel is the give-way vessel. The vessel being overtaken is the stand-on vessel.

Power vs. Sail



Alcohol and Drugs (625 ILCS 45/5-16)

Illinois law prohibits anyone from operating a vessel while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

- By operating a vessel on Illinois waters, you have given “implied” consent to alcohol and/or drug testing if arrested for operating under the influence.
- Illinois law states that a person is considered to be operating a vessel under the influence of alcohol or drugs if:

- The alcohol concentration in his or her blood or breath is 0.08% or more *or...*
- The person is under the influence of any other drug or combination of drugs and/or alcohol to a degree that renders him or her incapable of operating the vessel safely *or...*
- The person has any amount of a drug, substance, or compound in his or her blood or urine resulting from the unlawful use or consumption of cannabis, a controlled substance, or an intoxicating compound.



Just remember this simple rule:
Don't Drink and Boat!

Boating Accidents (625 ILCS 45/6)

- A vessel operator is required to make a written report whenever a boating accident results in:
 - Loss of life or disappearance of a person *or...*
 - Injury to any person *or...*
 - Property damage in excess of \$2,000.
- Accidents that result in death of any person must be reported to the DNR by the vessel operator within 48 hours of the accident. All other serious injuries and accidents must be reported to the DNR within five days.
- Accident report forms are available from any DNR office or on the Internet at media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/08/2002952253/-1/-1/0/CG_3865.PDF.

Enforcement (625 ILCS 45/2 and 45/5-22)

Illinois DNR officers and all other law enforcement officers enforce boating laws.

- Officers have the authority to stop and board your vessel in order to check that you are complying with state and federal laws.
- It is illegal to refuse to follow the directive of a person with law enforcement authority. An operator who has received a visual or audible signal from a law enforcement officer must bring his or her vessel to a stop.
- You must yield or slow to “slow, no wake speed” when being approached by or passing an emergency vessel using legal visual signals. Failure to yield or slow will result in a mandatory suspension of vessel operating privileges for a period of three months up to two years.

Diver-Down Flags (625 ILCS 45/5-19)

- Persons scuba diving, skin diving, snorkeling, or underwater spearfishing must display a diver-down flag to warn other boaters. A diver must stay within 150 feet of the flag. Unless there is an emergency, a diver may not surface more than 50 feet from the flag. It is unlawful to display a diver-down flag when not diving. Vessels not engaged in diving operations must stay at least 150 feet from a displayed diver-down flag.
- Two types of flags are used to indicate diving activity.



**Divers
Flag**

A rectangular red flag, at least 12" high x 15" wide, with a white diagonal stripe



**Alfa
Flag**

A blue-and-white International Code Flag A (or Alfa flag), required on federally controlled waters

Discharge of Sewage and Waste (625 ILCS 45/4-9)

Illinois law states that it is unlawful to discharge any sewage into Illinois waters directly or indirectly. Federal law requires that every vessel with an installed toilet must have an operable USCG–certified marine sanitation device (MSD) on board.

Specifically for PWC

In addition to adhering to all boating laws, PWC operators have requirements specific to their vessel.

Requirements for PWC

(625 ILCS 45/4-1, 625 ILCS 45/4-11, 625 ILCS 45/5-2, 625 ILCS 45/5-18, 625 ILCS 45/5-20)

- Every person on board a PWC or a specialty prop-craft must *wear* a USCG–approved PFD that is in good and serviceable condition. (Inflatable PFDs are not approved for PWC or prop-craft use.)
- If the PWC is equipped with an ECOS:
 - The lanyard must be attached to the person, clothing, or PFD of the operator *or...*
 - The wireless cut-off system must be activated.
- A PWC may not be operated between sunset and sunrise.
- There are minimum age and boater education requirements for PWC operators. See “Who May Operate a Vessel.”
- A PWC must be operated in a responsible manner. Maneuvers that endanger people or property are prohibited, including:
 - Weaving your PWC through congested waterway traffic
 - Jumping a wake of another vessel unreasonably close to the other vessel or when visibility around the other vessel is obstructed
 - Waiting until the last possible moment to swerve and avoid collision



Specifically for Skiing

Vessel operators towing a person(s) on water skis, aquaplanes, or any similar devices must obey these laws also.

Requirements for Towing Skiers (625 ILCS 45/5-14)

- When a vessel is pulling a person on water skis, aquaplanes, or similar devices, the operator must have a competent person on board to act as an observer.
- All vessels, including PWC, that are towing a person(s) on water skis, aquaplanes, or similar devices must be designed and recommended by the manufacturer to accommodate the operator, observer, and person(s) being towed.
- A person may not be towed from a half-hour after sunset to a half-hour before sunrise.
- Those towing skiers on water skis, aquaplanes, or similar devices and those being towed must act in a safe and prudent manner.
 - Vessels towing persons must maintain a reasonable distance from other persons and property so as not to endanger the life or property of any person.
 - It is illegal to operate the vessel or manipulate the towing rope, water skis, or other devices such that the towed device or person collides with any other person or object.

Skier-Towing Flag (625 ILCS 45/5-14)

Vessels towing persons on water skis or other devices must display a skier-towing flag from the highest point around the vessel's helm so that it is visible from all directions at all times while a person is in the water preparing to be towed, while the person is being towed, and until the person has re-entered the vessel. The flag may not be used for any other purpose.



The flag must be bright orange and at least 12" x 12" in size.

ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES



IDNR Central Office

One Natural Resources Way
Springfield, IL 62702
217-782-6302
www.dnr.illinois.gov

Office of Law Enforcement

217-782-6431
dnr.illinois.gov/lawenforcement.html

Contact Local Conservation Police Officer (CPO):

dnr.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/dnr/lawenforcement/documents/districtcpo_phonesandemails.pdf.

Prepare for Safety

Take a boating safety course. It's required by law for some Illinois boaters. Even if it's not required for you, becoming certified may save you money on boat insurance.

- ◆ To find a classroom course, call 1-800-832-2599.
- ◆ To take an online course, visit www.boat-ed.com/illinois.
- ◆ Everything you want to know about what's going on outdoors in Illinois is just a click away...



www.dnr.illinois.gov