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NEWS

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TRAFFIC SAFETY HINTS

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According to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, there were 78 reported recreational boating accidents, resulting in 45 injuries and 18 fatalities in 2004. Most boating accidents can be avoided by being as cautious while operating a boat as you are behind the wheel of a car. In fact, there is little difference between boating and driving when it comes to personal responsibility and the law.

Q. Is it illegal to consume alcohol while operating a boat?

A. Yes. Operating a watercraft under the influence is against the law and is as dangerous as drinking and driving. In fact, the risk of a boating accident increases threefold after only one drink. Drinking alcohol intensifies the effects of "boater's stress" (imbalance, fatigue, decreased coordination) caused by noise, sun, wind and a swaying boat.

Q. What is considered legally drunk while operating a boat?

A. A blood alcohol content (BAC) of .08 percent or more, the same as for driving a car or truck. Boaters can be convicted of an OUI (Operating Under the Influence) with a BAC of less than .08 if it is determined that their abilities are impaired by alcohol or drugs. Conservation Police Officers made 189 OUI arrests, issued 1,509 citations and 1,647 written warnings for various infractions of the Boat Registration and Safety Act during the 2004 boating season.

Legislation effective Jan. 1, 2003 increases the maximum prison sentence an individual could receive if he/she is found guilty of causing a fatal accident while driving drunk in a boat. The law increases an alcohol-related boating fatality to a Class 2 felony, which carries a possible 14-year prison term.

Q. Are boaters required by law to wear life-preservers?

A. Illinois law requires that each person on the boat must have a U. S. Coast Guard approved Type I, II or III personal flotation device "accessible" to him or her. State law also requires anyone operating a personal watercraft to wear a life-preserver, and anyone under the age of 13 to wear a life-preserver while aboard any watercraft under 26 feet in length at all times the boat is underway, unless they are below deck in an enclosed cabin or operating on private property.