



Frequently Asked Questions: Mandatory cold weather life jacket wear

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission passed a new regulation at its September 27, 2011, meeting on life jacket wear during cold weather months. [This regulation takes effect November 1, 2012](#), and states that:

a person shall wear a Coast Guard approved personal flotation device (PFD or life jacket) during the cold weather months from November 1st through April 30th while underway or at anchor on boats less than 16 feet in length or any canoe or kayak .

I'm a good swimmer so why do I need to wear a life jacket?

Cold water shock is a major factor in boating fatalities when water temperatures are less than 70 degrees F. Cold water shock causes an involuntary gasp (often resulting in aspiration of water), hyperventilation, breathlessness and a reduced ability to control breathing and swim. A life jacket greatly increases your chance for survival in cold water. It also increases the amount of time for you to be rescued.

Is wearing a life jacket really going to save lives during this time of the year?

Cold water shock is a major factor in boating fatalities. It happens when someone is suddenly immersed in cold water. The water does not have to be freezing; cold water shock often occurs in water temperatures above 50°F. Wearing a life jacket greatly increases the chance of survival and will save lives.

Why are waterfowl hunters and late fall/early spring anglers being singled out with this regulation?

A disproportionate number of fatalities occur during the months of November through April. Coldwater immersion is one of the primary reasons for these fatalities, based on Pennsylvania's boating accident data. That's why the chance of a boating accident resulting in a fatality is significantly higher from November through April than during the rest of the year.

Waterfowl hunters in small boats are at a greater risk. While hunting, you often reach overboard while setting or retrieving decoys, retrieving downed game, and may have dogs entering and exiting your boat. Worse yet, you may stand or move quickly in the heat of the hunt. Any of these activities may result in an unexpected fall overboard.

Boat stability is also an issue for anglers. Leaning over the side of the boat to net a trophy, or standing to fight a feisty fish can be enough to capsize a small boat or canoe.

Cold water shock is a major factor in boating fatalities when water temperatures are less than 70 degrees F. Cold water shock causes an involuntary gasp reflex (often resulting in aspiration of water), hyperventilation, breathlessness and a reduced ability to control breathing and to swim. Those wearing a life jacket when exposed to cold water have potentially life-saving advantages such as insulation from the cold, buoyancy and reduced risk of aspiration of water.

As a hunter, how can I be expected to shoot a firearm accurately while wearing a life jacket?

There are many different styles of U. S. Coast Guard (USCG) approved life jackets available that offer comfort and maneuverability for the shooter. Several Type III and V life jackets have been specifically designed for waterfowl hunters. These styles do not interfere with the fit of your firearm and are often available in a variety of popular camouflage patterns.

I can understand a requirement to wear my life jacket while underway (while the boat is moving or not anchored), but why am I being required to wear it while at anchor?

The majority of fatalities related to cold water shock occur in small boats, canoes and kayaks. These types of craft are small and unstable, especially when at anchor.

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Won't the life jackets required by this regulation be expensive and create a financial burden for me and other boaters?

The cost of a life jacket is small in comparison to the amount of money spent on shotguns, dogs, boats, fishing rods and reels, and other gear. Is this gear worth more than your life? (Ironically, some hunters put life jackets on their dogs, but they unfortunately neglect their own personal safety.)

There are a variety of USCG approved life jackets made specifically for waterfowl hunters, at many different prices. A comfortable life jacket is one that you'll wear each time you go boating, so take comfort and fit into consideration when shopping. The cost of a life jacket is a small investment when compared to the value of your life.

Where can I learn more about life jacket wear and cold water survival?

To learn more about life jacket wear and cold water survival, visit the PFBC website <http://fishandboat.com/safety.htm> and the Coldwater Boot Camp website <http://www.coldwaterbootcamp.com/pages/home.html>.

Here are some cold water survival safety tips:

- Always wear a life jacket, even when not required. Many models also offer insulation from cold air.
- Never boat alone.
- Leave a float plan and know the waters you plan to boat.
- Bring a fully-charged cell phone with you in case of emergency.
- Wear clothing that still insulates when wet such as fleece, polypropylene or other synthetics.
- If you are about to fall into cold water, cover your mouth and nose with your hands. This will reduce the likelihood of inhaling water.
- If possible, stay with the boat. Get back into or climb on top of the boat.
- While in the water, do not remove your clothing in cold water.
- If you can't get out of the water, get into the Heat Escape Lessening Posture (HELP).
- Once out of the water, get out of the wet clothes and warmed up as soon as possible.

