

**COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
PENNSYLVANIA FISH AND BOAT COMMISSION**

**MINUTES FOR
THE BOATING ADVISORY BOARD MEETING**

Wednesday, December 17, 2025

10:00 a.m.

Virtual

Members

Chair Rocco Ali

Vice Chair Steven Ketterer

Teresa Guerrein

Brian Kane

Loren Lustig

Members Ex Officio

Ryan Dysinger for Cindy Adams Dunn, Secretary,
Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
Charles Charlesworth, Boating At-Large Commissioner
Richard Lewis, Boating At-Large Commissioner

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 - A. Quarterly Board of Commissioners Meeting
 - i. January 26, 2026
 - B. Next Boating Advisory Board Meeting
 - i. March 23, 2026
- VIII. Adjourn

I. Call to Order, Welcome, and Roll Call

The virtual meeting was called to order by Chairman Rocco Ali at 10:00 a.m. Board members in attendance included: Chair Rocco Ali, Vice Chair Steven Ketterer, Teresa Guerrein, Brian Kane, Loren Lustig, and ex officio member Ryan Dysinger. A quorum was present.

In addition to the Board, Commissioner BJ Small was present, along with the following Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) staff: Timothy Schaeffer, Executive Director; Laurel Anders, Deputy Executive Director for Administration; Mark Sweppenhiser, Director of Boating; Robert Schefter, Chief Counsel; Mark McLaughlin, Chief of Waterways and Marina Management; Mark Morrison, Statewide Public Access Program Manager; Ryan Walt, Boating and Watercraft Safety Manager; Tanyan Carnes, Administrative Officer for Bureau of Boating; Adam Spangler, Boating Safety Education Specialist; Richard Morder, Aids to Navigation Manager; Jeff Sabo, Colonel for Bureau of Law Enforcement; Tom Edwards, Lieutenant Colonel for Bureau of Law Enforcement; John Hopkins, Southwest Region Captain for Bureau of Law Enforcement; Bob Caccese, Director of Policy; Kailee Glock, Legislative Liaison; Rachael Hersh, Strategic Initiatives and Projects Coordinator; Kathryn Brashear, Director of Administration; Mike Parker, Director of Communications; John Shero, Director of Information Technology; Tigh Savercool, Chief of Division of Licensing and Registration; Patrica Heinbaugh, Executive Secretary; Maria Flynn, Administrative Officer for Office of Chief Counsel; and Amanda Sonon, Federal Aid Coordinator.

Guests in attendance included: Rick Taylor, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary State Liaison Officer; William McManimen, United States Power Squadrons/America's Boating Club Chief Education Officer; Stacy Treier, Executive Director of the Senate Game and Fisheries Committee/Legislative Director for Senator James Malone; Tali MacArthur, Senior Program Manager for Watershed Outreach for the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC); Brian Whipkey, Outdoors Columnist for the USA Today Network; and other interested citizens.

II. Review and Approval of Minutes

A motion was made to approve the September 30, 2025, meeting minutes by Steven Ketterer and seconded by Loren Lustig. The motion carried.

III. Public Comment

Robert Schefter reported that no public comment was received.

IV. Old Business

No old business.

V. New Business

No new business.

VI. Discussion Items

A. Legislative Updates

Kailee Glock provided a legislative update outlining several key bills affecting boating safety and law enforcement. She began by recognizing the extensive efforts of the internal team, whose dedication was instrumental in advancing recent legislative accomplishments. She acknowledged PFBC staff and also thanked legislative partners and staff members for their collaboration and support.

Her first update addressed Act 45 of 2025, which now serves as the Commonwealth's Fiscal Code. Senate Bill 800, sponsored by Senator Rothman, provides greater flexibility in allowable expenditures of the PFBC's Fish Fund and Boat Fund. This allows for the funds to be used more efficiently to support activities with mutual fishing and boating benefits and reduces the need to raise fees for either user group. The act also includes provisions governing allowable expenditures, requires detailed recordkeeping, and incorporates permitting reforms to streamline processes. Governor Shapiro signed Act 45 into law on November 12, 2025.

She next discussed Act 53 of 2025 (Senate Bill 520), sponsored by Senator Baker, which authorizes the use of body-worn cameras for Waterways Conservation Officers. The legislation gives the PFBC discretion over implementation. The bill passed both chambers unanimously on November 19 and was signed by Governor Shapiro on November 24, 2025.

Kailee then highlighted House Bill 1418, sponsored by Representative Robert Merski, and Senate Bill 476, sponsored by Senator Lindsey Williams. These bills would expand boating safety education requirements by amending the definition of personal watercraft to align with the U.S. Coast Guard's definition and mandate life jacket wear, restrictions on operation from sunset to sunrise, and boating safety education certification requirements. House Bill 1418 is currently before the Senate Game and Fisheries Committee, and Senate Bill 476 is before the Senate Appropriations Committee.

The final update concerned House Bill 961, sponsored by Representative Natalie Mihalek, which focuses on dam marking requirements. The bill would require the Department of Environmental Protection to provide the PFBC with information on run-of-the-river dams and their markings, which would then be shared through the Bureau of Boating and the Bureau of Law Enforcement. The legislation includes shorter timeframes for marking hazards, adds penalties, and updates definitions to improve safety and visibility for waterway users. House Bill 961 was unanimously reported as amended by the House Fisheries Committee on November 18, 2025.

B. PA Water Trails

Tali McArthur, Senior Program Manager with the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC) and Coordinator of the Pennsylvania Water Trails Partnership, provided an overview of the program. The Pennsylvania Water Trails Partnership includes Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), the PFBC, the National Park Service, PEC, and numerous local

managers. PEC plays a major statewide role in conservation, recreation, watershed protection, and community-focused economic development.

Pennsylvania has 28 designated water trails totaling more than 2,200 miles, with the Perkiomen Creek Water Trail as the newest addition. Water trails are waterways primarily suited for non-motorized boating however some are large enough to support motorized boating. To be designated, a trail must have public access points, be navigable for most of the season, show community support, and have a committed local manager. Expanding designations will be a major focus in 2026.

Program principles emphasize partnership, stewardship, education, volunteerism, conservation, community and economic development, equitable access, and personal wellness. Beyond recreation, the program promotes cleanup efforts, safe boating practices, and paddling education.

Each trail is supported by a local manager—such as a watershed association, land trust, or planning department—responsible for stewardship activities, public communication, maps, signage, and community programming. PEC provides training, technical assistance, and statewide coordination.

Tali indicated a more formal program framework is being developed, including a memorandum of understanding outlining roles and expectations. Agency partners collaborate through an Executive Partners Committee, which guides policy, management, and implementation and supports the program's five-year strategic action plan.

Water trail designation benefits managers, users, and communities. While funding is limited, incentives include mini-grants up to \$7,000, promotional support, and technical assistance. Users benefit from maps, signage, events, training, stewardship opportunities, and economic activity generated for local businesses. Mini-grants support projects such as kiosks, signage, accessibility assessments, launch improvements, maps, and website updates.

Tali concluded with priorities from the strategic plan through 2029: strengthening program management, supporting trail managers, expanding inclusive access, identifying new waterways, increasing promotion, and connecting water trail use to wellness goals.

Mark Sweppenhiser then highlighted the Susquehanna River North Branch Water Trail homepage, featuring video footage of the trail. As an active partner in the PA Water Trails Partnership, the PFBC regularly promotes individual trails. Its website links users to resources from DCNR, PEC, and local managers.

Digital tools were also showcased, including DCNR's Google Earth-based virtual paddles, such as a virtual Pine Creek paddle that lets users explore access points and river features remotely. Other watershed groups are developing similar video-based tours.

The presentation emphasized strong collaboration among partner agencies and the value of online tools in helping users plan safe trips. It also underscored that waterways are dynamic

and conditions can change quickly, especially during summer storms. Users were encouraged to rely on current information, follow safety guidance, and always wear life jackets.

C. Run of the River Dam Marking Guidelines

Mark Sweppenhiser provided an overview of Run-of-the-River Dam Marking Guidelines and their connection to House Bill 961. He referenced Act 91 of 1998, which requires the marking of low-head dams in Pennsylvania. These dams, often called mill dams or run-of-the-river dams, create a dangerous hydraulic “boil” on the downstream side. The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) classifies these structures based on construction and hydraulic assessments then determines which meet the statutory definition.

DEP supplies the PFBC with a list of qualifying dams, including ownership and structural details. The PFBC then enforces marking requirements through established buoy and signage standards. Because these standards have changed little since 1999, the PFBC is now working to update them to reflect modern measurement methods, evolving safety practices, and increased waterway use.

Improved mapping tools, including Google Earth, have made it easier to locate and evaluate dams without extensive fieldwork. These tools have helped identify previously overlooked structures and update classifications. As ownership and permitting information changes, the PFBC is updating records to ensure landowners receive accurate compliance guidance. Pennsylvania currently has 237 run-of-the-river dams, including two Delaware River wing dams reclassified after a 2020 statutory change.

The presentation outlined how dam length influences marking requirements and exclusion zones. Most dams are under 200 feet long, with fewer exceeding 300 feet. Diagrams illustrated danger zones, warning areas, and proper placement of signs and buoys. Visibility challenges, such as vegetation, poor sign angles, and fluctuating water levels, remain ongoing safety concerns.

Operational challenges include difficult portage routes, maintenance of buoys and signage, misconceptions about dam safety, and water conditions that can obscure hazards. Additional complications arise when dam owners do not control both shorelines or when dams lie within shared jurisdictions, such as the Delaware River, where Pennsylvania and New Jersey have differing requirements. These issues highlight the need for clearer, more practical guidelines.

Next steps include gathering feedback from water trail partners, dam owners, and permittees to refine proposed updates. After review, revised guidelines will be published in the Pennsylvania Bulletin and distributed to responsible parties. Waterways Conservation Officers will continue annual inspections. These efforts align with House Bill 961, which also requires DEP and the PFBC to create public-facing websites to improve access to dam location and hazard information statewide.

D. Abandoned and Derelict Vessels (ADV) Forms and Process

Tigh Savercool provided an overview of the abandoned and derelict vessel processes that will take effect in January 2026. A boat is considered abandoned if it is inoperable and left unattended on Commonwealth waters or public property for more than 48 hours, left without valid registration, or remains on a salvor's private property for more than 30 days. A derelict boat is one on Commonwealth waters or public property that is sunk or partially sunk, aground without the ability to free itself, left after an accident or fire, or in a deteriorated condition with compromised hull, steering, or propulsion systems. An at-risk boat is one likely to become derelict, such as a boat taking on water, remaining out during extreme weather, breaking loose from its mooring, or lacking effective propulsion.

For boats abandoned on private property, the landowner, lessee, or designee must submit Form R2 to the PFBC. The PFBC attempts to notify the last owner by certified mail. If the owner does not respond within 30 days, the requester must publish notice for three consecutive days. If uncontested for 30 days, the requester may apply for registration.

For boats abandoned on Commonwealth property or waters, municipalities or law enforcement must submit Form ADV-001 within seven days. If an owner is identified, notice must be delivered by certified mail, in person, or by verifiable electronic means, and the owner has 14 days to remove or address the vessel. If the owner is unknown, notice must be published in a newspaper and electronically, and the owner has 14 days from publication to act, with all costs remaining their responsibility.

For at-risk boats, owners may reclaim vessels removed and stored after the 14-day notice period by paying removal, storage, and any fines within 30 days. If a boat is officially deemed abandoned or derelict, the owner loses the right to reclaim it after 30 days and remains responsible for all associated costs.

For vessels involving marine businesses or lienholders, boats valued above \$7,965 must go through the court system. Boats below that threshold may follow the forfeiture process: the business establishes the terminal date, notifies the owner or lienholder after 30 days, submits Form R9, and publishes notice twice over two weeks. On the 31st day after the second notice, ownership rights are extinguished and the business must apply for ownership within 30 days.

Supporting forms include Form R2 for private property cases, Form R5 for public property, Form ADV-001 for Commonwealth waters, and Form R9 for forfeiture. A template notification letter is also being developed. All materials will be available on the PFBC's website to guide users through each step of the process.

E. Boating Facility Grant Program Summary

Mark Morrison provided a summary of the Boating Facility Grant Program. The 2026 grant round closed on December 1 and offers funding to public entities, including local governments and nonprofits, for expanding or rehabilitating boating facilities. Eligible projects include boat ramps, parking areas, access roads, permanent restrooms, signage, and design or engineering

work. The program requires a 50% match through cash, in-kind contributions, labor, materials, or other grants. Because it is a reimbursable program, funds are issued after project completion. Applicants must control the property for at least 25 years, maintain public access, and secure all necessary permits.

Funding comes from boat registration fees, launch permits, state fuel taxes, and federal programs. For the 2026 cycle, 16 applications were submitted requesting about \$1.8 million toward roughly \$4 million in total project costs. Applications will be evaluated by a cross-agency staff review team.

After application review, projects recommended for funding that request \$100,000 or less will be approved by the Executive Director, while those exceeding \$100,000 will be presented to the Commissioners at the April meeting. After cooperative agreements are executed with the project partners, PFBC will provide notice to proceed, and the partners have approximately 30 months to complete their projects. Project partners must comply with the 25-year public access, maintenance and operation requirement. Since the program began in 2005, 294 applications have been received and considered by the PFBC and 176 approved, representing \$49.7 million in total project costs and \$15.5 million in PFBC funding. The overall match rate is about 31%, reflecting additional funding leveraged by applicants.

In 2025, 14 projects were completed. Recent examples include improvements at Wisecarver Reservoir in Greene County, featuring an adaptive kayak launch, paved access road, drop-off area, and pathways, with a second phase planned for summer 2026. Another project in the Town of Bloomsburg involved designing and constructing a new boat launch at the confluence of Fishing Creek and the Susquehanna River, including access roads, ADA-accessible parking, paved pathways, and signage. These projects highlight ongoing investments in public boating access across the Commonwealth.

F. Boat Rental Businesses

Adam Spangler provided an update on boat rental businesses following the implementation of new rental boat regulations in January 2025. At the start of the year, approximately 65 rental businesses were known to be operating in Pennsylvania. Over the next 12 months, Waterways Conservation Officers (WCOs) visited 144 businesses statewide, informing 79 additional business operators about the new regulations and prompting them to submit required information to PFBC. Those that had not responded were contacted again to improve communication and compliance.

This outreach strengthened partnerships with rental businesses, provided educational tools for their staff and customers, and gave the PFBC reliable contact information to better support business operators and boaters. WCOs also identified several areas needing improvement. Of those visited, about 40% of businesses lacked proper rental identification on boats, 30% were unaware of the regulatory changes, and roughly 15% had registration or launch permit issues. Safety inspections frequently revealed missing required equipment, particularly whistles on rental kayaks and canoes.

The visits also offered insight into rental fleet composition. Approximately 71% of operations primarily rent paddlecraft—such as kayaks, canoes, jon boats, and rowboats—while smaller percentages offer mixed fleets or powerboats only. This information helps the PFBC tailor safety messaging, training, and educational resources for both business operators and their customers. To support ongoing communication, the PFBC has initiated a biannual newsletter, *Float Notes*, which is distributed in May and September, with the most recent edition achieving a 70% open rate.

Looking ahead to 2026, the number of boat rental businesses that submit their information to PFBC is expected to grow as more business operators come into compliance, enabling the PFBC to maintain accurate public listings and provide timely regulatory updates. Collaboration among WCOs, rental businesses, water trail managers, DCNR, and other partners has been essential in improving awareness and compliance. Overall, the regulatory changes are yielding positive results by enhancing safety outreach, strengthening communication, and supporting continued progress within Pennsylvania’s boating community.

G. Ice Rescue Training

Ryan Walt provided an overview of ice rescue and ice safety training initiatives planned for January and February as winter conditions develop. He outlined scheduled training sessions with several partners, including the Pennsylvania Game Commission’s cadet class in Harrisburg, ice rescue courses for the Pennsylvania National Guard, the PFBC’s Waterways Conservation Officer cadets, and ice safety and basic survival water rescue training for Bureau of Outreach, Education, and Marketing educators. An instructor-level course will also be offered, and it is expected to draw firefighters from Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., where ice training opportunities are limited. Staff, BAB members, and Commissioners were invited to observe or participate by contacting staff after the meeting.

Updated public education materials were highlighted, including revised weak-ice signage and a lake ice safety guide emphasizing how ice thickness and stability vary with changing conditions. These materials reinforce that ice is dynamic and never completely safe, while offering practical guidance for anglers and other recreational users. The ice rescue and emergency response curriculum follows a progressive crawl-walk-run structure, covering shore-based techniques such as throw bags and floating tether systems, ice-based rescues using ice staffs for sounding and safe travel, and boat or platform-based rescues using rapid-deployment craft, small boats, or secured extension ladders.

Training also includes direct-contact rescue techniques using rescue slings, with students first practicing in a pool before moving to open-water scenarios to ensure safety and familiarity. The curriculum was revised in 2025 and implemented during the previous winter season, during which nearly 500 students completed the 16-hour ice rescue emergency response course. Combined swift-water and ice rescue programs trained nearly 4,000 students overall, marking another successful year and setting expectations for a strong training season in 2026.

VII. Other Business

The next quarterly Board of Commissioners Meeting will be held on January 26, 2026.

The next Boating Advisory Board Meeting will be held on March 23, 2026.

VIII. Adjourn

A motion to adjourn was made by Steven Ketterer and seconded by Brian Kane. The motion carried and the meeting was adjourned at 11:31 a.m.