

Submission on the Life Jackets for Children and Young Persons Bill

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Submitter details

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Submission

Introduction

1. Recreation Aotearoa is the professional association and peak industry body responsible for providing leadership, advocacy, and professional development opportunities for those involved in the broader recreation sector. We represent the collective voice of recreation in New Zealand, ensuring that the value of recreation is recognised across government, industry, and communities.
2. Our membership includes recreation policy makers, territorial local authorities, voluntary organisations, regional sports trusts, outdoor recreation providers, and others engaged in delivering facilities, programmes and services that make recreation accessible.
3. Our mission is enhancing wellbeing through recreation. We believe recreation is not a discretionary “nice-to-have” but a fundamental contributor to New Zealand’s physical and mental health, social cohesion, youth development, and national wellbeing.
4. Recreation Aotearoa welcomes the opportunity to submit on the Life Jackets for Children and Young Persons Bill, which aims to make fundamental changes to Maritime Rules.

General Comments

5. Recreation Aotearoa views the proposed Bill as a positive and necessary step in changing future behaviour and addressing New Zealand’s high fatal drowning rate.
6. The Bill proposes that recreational craft 6 metres or less (in waterline length) cannot be used unless every person on board under 15 years is wearing a lifejacket. However, we believe this Bill presents the biggest drowning prevention opportunity in a generation and must be strengthened to achieve a much greater impact on saving lives.
7. Recreation Aotearoa supports the views and recommendations put forward by Water Safety New Zealand (WSNZ) and Coastguard NZ. Drowning incidents on watercraft are often unexpected, giving boat users

little or no time to put on lifejackets that are merely carried on board. Their analysis shows that an average of 12 lives could be saved every year if everyone on a craft wore a lifejacket, equating to around 120 lives saved over the next ten years

Specific Comments and Recommendations

Mandatory Wearing Must Apply to All Ages and All Recreational Craft

8. While the focus on children under 15 is appreciated, the Bill does not go far enough to address the primary risk groups. Statistics show that adults - particularly men over 40 - make up the majority of watercraft fatalities. To genuinely reduce drownings, mandatory lifejacket use must extend beyond children.
9. We recommend the Bill be extended to apply *to all people on all recreational craft*. Although vessels 6 metres and under account for the majority (86%) of craft-related drownings where no lifejacket was worn, fatalities also happen on vessels over 6 metres.
10. Mandatory use must apply to all recreational craft, regardless of size, to increase survivability and provide consistency

The Need for a Single, Consistent National Rule

11. The current safety regime is fragmented: the national rule is weak, requiring only the *carriage* of lifejackets for most craft, and differences in regional bylaws create confusion among users. This confusion is contributing to fatalities.
12. Recreation Aotearoa submits that strengthening the Bill will fix this confusing patchwork of rules. New Zealand needs one simple, easy-to-follow national rule that removes confusion and helps everyone make the right decision. This law change is essential to establish a culture where lifejacket use is normal - a behavioural shift comparable to wearing a seatbelt in a vehicle or using a helmet when cycling. We note that previous legislation, such as pool fencing laws, cut child drownings by almost 80%, demonstrating that legislation works for water safety.

Conclusion

13. Recreation Aotearoa supports the intent of the Life Jackets for Children and Young Persons Bill, but we urge the Select Committee to use this opportunity to implement a robust solution that will maximize life-saving outcomes.
14. Recreation Aotearoa recommends the Select Committee support the following amendment:
 - Extend the mandatory wearing requirement to all people on all recreational craft.
15. Recreation Aotearoa looks forward to discussing our submission during oral hearings.