

Wake Boats: Enhanced Wake Creation and Ballast Systems

Interested in Joining the Coalition? Please free free to contact Wisconsin Wildlife Federation Executive Director, Cody Kamrowski at cody@wiwf.org or at 715-896-5445

Legislative Outline

As of 4/28/2025, 76 organizations from throughout the state with widely varying political ideologies support the creation of minimum state standards for water sports activities employing enhanced wake creation techniques such as ballast, fins or other wave-shaping devices, and bow-up artificial wake creation.

Recommended Minimum State Standards

Due to the large number of lakes and rivers in Wisconsin and the diversity of municipalities in which they reside, State-wide minimum standards will provide a modicum of protection for one of our State's greatest assets while providing recreational opportunities for all users. The minimum standards that we recommend are as follows:

- 1) Enhanced wake creation activities shall only occur 700 feet or more from a lake and river shoreline or island shoreline.
- 2) Enhanced wake creation activities shall only occur at water depths in excess of 30 feet.
- 3) Ballast systems must comply with DNR regulations NR19.055 and NR40. All ballast systems are subject to the "Home Lake Rule", requiring thermal decontamination by a certified individual before launching and owner certification paperwork for single-lake use. Boats must be professionally decontaminated when relocating to a different lake or river and receive accompanying paperwork. Furthermore, any anti-freeze in ballast tanks must be fully purged before a boat enters a Wisconsin lake or river. These regulations take effect one year after enactment.
- 4) Local units of government shall continue to have the right to enact ordinances more restrictive than these State minimum standards when necessary to fully protect the waters under their jurisdiction. Any currently existing local ordinances that are stricter than these state minimums shall be allowed to continue to be in effect.

Basis for Minimum State Standards for Enhanced Wake Sports

Safety

- Enhanced wakes, which have significantly greater energy than typical power boat wakes, are capable of capsizing smaller vessels and causing passengers on larger vessels to lose balance and incur injury.
- Enhanced wakes impacting docks and piers as people are getting into or out of a boat poses a serious risk of injury.
- Swimmers near a boat, dock, or other obstruction in the water when an enhanced wake passes are in danger of being thrown into the boat, dock, or obstruction causing injury.

Environmental

- Enhanced wakes are capable of eroding shorelines that are not armored and damaging existing armor that was not designed or built for such large waves.
- Enhanced wakes generated in shallow waters risk scouring of the lake or river bottom, dislodging aquatic plants and wild rice beds, reducing fish habitat, re-suspending sediments, adding nutrients to the water that can lead to algae blooms, and increasing turbidity.
- Enhanced wakes can negatively impact shoreline vegetation which provides habitat, food and nesting for insects, small aquatic organisms, turtles, fish species, loons, and other waterfowl.

Property Damage

- Enhanced wakes can damage piers and docks that were not designed or constructed for waves with as much as four times the energy of typical power boat waves.
- Enhanced wakes can cause boats moored at docks and piers, and the docks and piers themselves, to be seriously damaged when these high energy waves crash into them.
- Enhanced wakes have been documented to have damaged boats operating in the vicinity. Few inland lake or river boats are designed and built to withstand waves over four feet in height.

Aquatic Invasive Species Transport and Antifreeze

- Internal ballast systems retain water and can potentially transport Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) from one water body to another. AIS have the potential to alter ecosystems by reducing or eliminating native species.
- Additionally, the ballast systems can retain antifreeze from winterization which can be discharged into waters upon use after storage.

Local Municipal Control

- Wisconsin has more than 15,000 lakes and roughly 2,500 lakes are larger than 50 acres, allowing for any watercraft to create a wake. No two lakes are identical with respect to configuration, use and ecology. The residents of local municipalities are the most knowledgeable about their lakes and the most invested in how best to protect them.
- And while it is perfectly appropriate for the State to set minimum standards to protect one of the State's most significant assets, local control permits addressing unique circumstances that could not reasonably have been foreseen or are pertinent to only one or a small number of lakes and rivers.