



**Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission
Abandoned and Derelict Vessels Testimony
House Game and Fisheries Committee, Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Paul Littman, Director, Bureau of Boating
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Good morning, Chairs Kulik and Maloney and Committee members. My name is Paul Littman, and I am the Director of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's Bureau of Boating. Thank you for inviting the Commission and other key partners to share their perspectives and experiences concerning the emergent concern of abandoned and derelict vessels (ADVs). I am pleased to be among this network of federal, state, and local entities coming together to discuss this important issue and collaborate on potential solutions.

The Commission has a long history of regulating the operation of boats and encouraging, promoting, and developing recreational boating on waters of the Commonwealth. Additionally, the Commission is responsible for administering a recreational boating safety program approved by and on behalf of the United States Coast Guard. The Commission has been involved in the growing discussions around the topic of ADVs across the nation. As many of you know, the topic rose in prominence in Pennsylvania last year when a large recreational boat was abandoned along the Allegheny River, approximately one-half mile from where this hearing is taking place today. Unfortunately, it was one of several abandoned boats in the Three Rivers area and representative of an issue occurring across the Commonwealth. There are many complex issues

at play when a boat is abandoned in waters of the Commonwealth, and these issues are not unique to Pennsylvania.

It is against this backdrop that I would like to outline some central concepts that underlie the discussion of ADVs, as well as the problems ADVs can cause, including a few considerations to keep in mind when developing solutions.

Key Problems

ADV's can create environmental hazards, particularly when boats become partially or totally submerged. Fuel, oil, antifreeze, sewage, batteries, and other environmental contaminants onboard boats are at risk of entering the waterway. These boats can pose multiple safety hazards, such as becoming a navigational hazard for recreational or commercial boat traffic. As is often the case here in Pittsburgh, these vessels often occupy premium space where other recreational boaters could dock or moor their boats. Abandoned vessels that create a waterway obstruction could lead to severe injury or death. ADVs are generally a nuisance, which may lure inquisitive persons into exploring a scene that is likely more dangerous than it appears or invite undesirable activities such as vandalism, loitering, theft, and arson. Lastly, ADVs are an eyesore that detract from the scenic and aesthetic values Pennsylvanians have come to expect along their waterways.

Key Terms

Abandonment can occur as a boat advances gradually towards disrepair, or it can happen with a sudden event. Therefore, it is helpful to think about boats progressing along a continuum from brand new to being disposed of properly when no longer useful. At a point along that continuum, a boat can be considered at-risk of becoming derelict or abandoned. These vessels often need substantial and expensive work. If repairs or attention to risks are not addressed, the boat eventually may become derelict.

A derelict boat is not operational, but it still has an identifiable owner. The owner is responsible for properly disposing of a derelict boat. The owner of a boat registered in Pennsylvania must notify the Commission when the boat is no longer in service or changes in ownership. Unfortunately, some owners choose to neglect their responsibility and abandon their boat, leaving others to deal with it and contribute to a nationwide problem.

Key Considerations

The process of addressing an ADV can be lengthy, costly, and may involve many entities. Initial reports of an ADV need to be verified and investigated by law enforcement. An officer must collect vessel data and review the circumstances to determine next steps. Does the boat pose a threat to the environment or navigation? Who owns the boat? Why is it here? Who abandoned it? Who controls the property where the boat was abandoned? What site-specific challenges exist for removing the boat? These answers can be complicated and difficult to discover.

Close coordination between federal, state, and local entities is often key to developing a course of action for abandoned vessels, especially in the case of large recreational boats containing potential pollutants. Initial actions entail researching the chain of ownership and providing the rightful owner with sufficient opportunity to reclaim possession of the boat. They may also involve securing the services of parties with the skills and resources to remove or mitigate environmental hazards, lift the boat from the waterway, and transport the boat for storage or disposal. Boat owners are responsible for the costs of removal, storage and, if necessary, disposal, in addition to costs associated with pollution events or the removal of potential pollutants. In the event an owner does not reclaim the boat, it may be claimed by the Commission, a landowner, a salvor, or another entity and resold or disposed of properly.

To successfully address the complex issues of ADVs—both proactively and when they end up abandoned on the Commonwealth’s waterways—will likely require a multi-pronged approach. The Commission looks forward to working with the partners here in the room today and other stakeholders to address ADVs through the development of policies and programs that are appropriate for the types of recreational boats used on Pennsylvania’s waters. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and thank you to the partners who were able to join us today. I would be happy to answer any questions.