



**National
Transportation
Safety Board**

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Information

Statement by

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Acting Chairman

National Transportation Safety Board

**At the Announcement of the
Off-power Assisted Steering System (OPAS)
Developed by
Bombardier Recreational Products**

**Palm Beach, Florida
August 24, 2001**

Good morning. Thank you Mr. Baril, for your kind introduction. The State of Florida is a perfect place to address personal watercraft safety: first, Florida weather and the boating waters are great, and second the State has made many contributions in advancing recreational boating safety.

I am so pleased to be here this morning to join Bombardier Recreational Products to announce another innovation to improve safety on our Nation's waterways and for the personal watercraft operators who use them.

Recreational boating safety, including personal watercraft safety, is on the Board's "Most Wanted" list of safety improvement. Why? Because actions are still needed to improve safety for this segment of the boating industry.

In 1998, the Safety Board published a study on personal watercraft that addressed a number of safety issues. We found that many accidents occur because of a lack of operator control during off-throttle steering situations. Further, we found that 84 percent of personal watercraft operators had not received any boating safety instruction and yet they were out on the water operating vessels that could reach speeds in excess of 50 miles per hour. It was interesting to note that many of the accidents occurred during the first hour of operation.

As a result, the Safety Board made a number of recommendations.

First, we asked the States to require that everyone aboard a personal watercraft wear a personal flotation device or PFD. I am pleased to report that to date, every State, except

Hawaii and the District of Columbia, require the mandatory use of personal flotation devices by anyone riding a personal watercraft. This includes both operators and passengers.

The Safety Board, the U.S. Coast Guard, the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators, and the American Academy of Pediatrics, all recommend that children up through age 12 be required to use PFDs, on all recreational vessels, including personal watercraft. Unfortunately, Florida's requirement for recreational vessels, other than personal watercraft, only covers children under age 6. I hope that Florida will strengthen their recreational vessel PFD law in the next legislative session.

Second, we asked that rental locations provide safety instruction training to everyone who rents or operates one of their personal watercraft. To date, 24 States, including Florida, require rental businesses to provide safety

instruction training for persons who rent personal watercraft. I want to recognize the efforts of the Personal Watercraft Industry Association, who in cooperation with the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators and the Coast Guard, developed a standardized safety checklist for use at rental locations in training riders on personal watercraft operation.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, the Board asked the personal watercraft manufacturers, the Personal Watercraft Industry Association, and the Coast Guard to look into design changes that would improve operator control and help prevent injuries. We wanted the manufacturers to consider items such as off-throttle steering, braking, padded handlebars, and safety equipment such as personal floatation devices.

Currently, the PWC manufacturers and the Coast Guard are working on developing safety standards to address the problems of operator control during off-throttle/off-power steering situations.

And today, we have Bombardier's announcement — introducing their off-power assisted steering system (OPAS). This important new technology will provide some additional operator control during off-throttle/off-power situations and should further minimize serious casualties involving personal watercraft. On behalf of the National Transportation Safety Board, I applaud your efforts.

Before concluding my remarks, I want to recognize the personal watercraft industry for their efforts to voluntarily limit personal watercraft speeds. And I want to again congratulate Bombardier for their introduction last year of

the “Learning Key” on some of its models. The “Learning Key” enables parents and rental operators to limit the speed at which first-time riders can operate a personal watercraft.

I hope that the other personal watercraft manufacturers will follow Bombardier’s leadership and provide off-throttle /off power assisted steering capability on personal watercraft to enhance their safety. The Safety Board looks forward to working with the States, personal watercraft manufacturers, and the Coast Guard to make sure that we do everything that we can to be sure that personal watercraft operation is pleasant, fun, and safe.

Thank you.