



Who's in charge of the future of boating and fishing?

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STATEWIDE — Doomsday reporting could have you believe the respective futures of recreational boating and sportfishing activities are either uncertain or in dire straits. A recreational fishing advocacy group in California, for example, released a report several months back, claiming the state's angling participation is in a "death spiral." Other organizations launched initiatives to promote boating or fishing activities to younger audiences, in hopes of convincing them to spend their recreational dollars on the water.

An event in New Jersey and the introduction of a legislative proposal in Sacramento in recent weeks serve as a flashpoint of what thought leaders and policymakers are thinking when it comes to the respective states of recreational boating and fishing participation, be it in California or nationwide.

The questions to ask, interestingly enough, are whether participation rates for boating and fishing are truly in jeopardy of dropping to the point of threatening both industries and are the variety of initiatives in play (or being developed) enough to stifle decline.

Let's start with the event in New Jersey. *Trade Only Today*, in its March 2 package of online postings, shared news of a "Marine Career Day" in Atlantic City. Approximately 40 students from New Jersey and Philadelphia area schools, colleges and trade institutes attended the event, according to *Trade Only Today*. Attendees were briefed on exploring the careers in recreational boating. Among those speaking at the career day event were Sen. Corey Booker, D-New Jersey, Atlantic City Mayor Frank Gilliam and Jim Donofrio of the Recreational Fishing Alliance.

Meanwhile, an Assembly member nearly 3,000 miles away in Sacramento proposed the creation of a standing group to identify potential barriers to

sportfishing and their effects on license sales. Assemblymember James Gallagher, R-Chico, introduced Assembly Bill 2465 (AB 2465) on Feb. 14.

The standing group, to be known as Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation (R3), would be created by the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW). Its membership would be comprised of DFW's director, president of the National Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation, and other stakeholders from the sportfishing industry, as nominated.

AB 2465, if passed by the legislature and signed into law, would require the R3 group to be up and running by Feb. 1, 2019. Its members would then have 90 days to "approve recommendations for removing, when possible, the barriers" to sportfishing.

Are these initiatives proactive in nature? Do we need boating-themed career days in California to foster greater interest in vessel ownership or participation? What if the R3 group finds the barriers to sportfishing are California's calendar-based fishing license system or Marine Protected Areas? Are California's boating and sportfishing industries in such dire situations, in terms of future participation, as to require substantive shifts in policymaking or marketing campaigns?

California was home to more than 740,000 registered vessels in 2017, including 86,082 in Los Angeles County, 55,132 in San Diego County and 50,542 in Orange County. Those numbers were down from 2010, when 810,008 recreational vessels were registered in the state (101,183 in Los Angeles County, 58,888 in Orange County and 58,061 in San Diego County).

Total vessel registration has ranged between 697,412 (2016) and 855,243 (2011) between 2011 and 2017. Vessel registration in 2009, just after the outset of the Great Recession, was at 906,988. California's best year was 2001, when 967,909 vessels were officially registered with the state.

Vessel registration has consistently fluctuated between about 650,000 and almost 1,000,000 since 1985. It's unclear whether these statistics have any bearing on the future of boating participation. What role do boat sales, just the same, play in dictating or predicting the number of boaters who'll be on the water (regardless of frequency)?

Complementing the Division of Boating and Waterways' statistics is fishing license numbers from the state's Department of Fish and Wildlife. License sales were mostly steady this decade, ranging from 1,742,782 (2011) to 1,803,632 (2012). Anglers purchased 1,788,386 licenses in 2017 and 1,790,870 in 2016. Revenues ranged from \$59,292,788 (2011) to \$65,490,959 (2016).

What interesting is while revenues are at an all-time high – 2016's revenue was the state's high mark – overall fishing participation steadily declined during the past few decades.

California sold about 2.5 million licenses in 1981, for example. License sales ranged from 1.9 million to 2.25 million during the 1990s and stayed roughly the same through the first decade of the 2000s.

The sale of sportfishing licenses definitely waned in the 2010s, however, never once reaching 2 million purchases for a year this decade (so far). Anglers bought almost 800,000 fewer licenses in 2011 (1,742,782) than they did in 1981 (2,541,627).

Will the R3 group, assuming AB 2465 becomes law, be able to figure out why sportfishing license sales have been trending downwards since 1981? Vessel registration has remained relatively steady since the 1990s, but what can be done to consistently eclipse one million registrations each year?

Anglers and boaters should certainly chime in and provide policymakers or thought leaders with suggestions of how to make boating or fishing more attractive as recreational activities. Call Gallagher's office, for example, and urge the campaign hard for AB 2465 if you believe it'd genuinely help increase fishing participation in California. Perhaps California could, as a start, borrow a page from New Jersey and have a boating career day.

There are clearly other ideas out there, but angling/boating advocacy groups or legislators won't be able to figure out how to implement any of them until they hear from anglers and boaters.

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