

STATE OF VERMONT



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY
VERMONT STATE POLICE
3294 St. George Rd
Williston, VT 05495

January 30, 2026

Senator Richard Westman-Chair
Senate Committee on Transportation
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Senator Westman

I am writing to thank you for your committee's support of our testimony regarding S.172- "An act relating to requiring the use of personal flotation devices during cold weather" on Thursday, January 30th. I was particularly impressed with the high level of engagement and thoughtful questions from the members of the committee, as well as everyone's shared passion for the safety and well being of Vermonters on our waterways.

I've included the answers to the questions posed during testimony on Thursday. Should any of the committee members have additional questions, or need any further information related to the answers below, do not hesitate to contact me.

Best Regards,

Al Johnson

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"Your Safety Is Our Business"

Question: Average Cost/Recovery?

While it's extremely difficult to calculate the cost of an individual underwater recovery call (as no two calls are the same), I can provide some foundational costs for the VT State Police Underwater Recovery Team (URT), as well as our ongoing personnel costs for the past year.

During the 2025 Recreational Boating Safety (RBS) grant cycle (October 1, 2024, through September 30, 2025) our personnel costs for URT were as follows:

2025 Dive Team RBS Expenditures	\$ Amount	Hours	Avg \$/Hr
Salary Hours	70,976.46	1,874.45	37.87
Overtime & Shift Differential	39,870.26	932.75	42.74
Benefits	59,409.08		21.16
Totals	170,255.80	2,807.20	60.65

The team's training hours are paid at straight-rate and response calls are paid at overtime. During the response, all ten (10) members of the team are present, so using the rates above (which are blended through all ten positions), the hourly cost of the team members for a response is \$639 (42.74 + 21.16 x 10 members/hour).

As I discussed in testimony on Thursday, variability in recovery responses is significant. The rate above is straight forward for a VSP-only response. That being said, costs related to a long duration, multi-agency response would be exponentially higher (especially during a multi-day event).

In addition to staff costs, the process required to "stand-up" and maintain an underwater recovery team is a significant investment in specialized equipment, training, organizational and operational support, and the human resources required of the team. It should also be mentioned that members of the VSP URT hold full-time law enforcement positions, while participating in dive team activities as an additional duty. Based on the information that I can quickly quantify, the initial cost to equip the 10-member VSP Underwater Recovery Team quickly approaches an investment of \$500,000. That figure does not include ongoing equipment maintenance or equipment lifecycle replacement(s).

Question: Number of Life Jacket Infractions & Tickets Issued?

During the 2025 RBS grant cycle, which includes the summer 2025 boating season, the Vermont State Police-Marine Division and its on-the-water partners (Vermont Fish & Wildlife, Colchester Police Department and the Grand Isle County Sheriff's Department) documented the following statistics related to boating law and other measurable activities:

Hours on the water:	1,767
Warnings:	618
Tickets:	77
Vessel Inspections:	928
Paddlecraft Interactions:	2,713

Personal Flotation Devices

As it relates to personal flotation device laws, we track non-compliance in three different ways, based on statutory requirements:

Mandatory Wear-Mandatory wear defines boaters that are required by law to wear a life jacket including:

- Children under 12 years of age aboard a vessel while underway on an open deck
- All operators/passengers on a personal watercraft
- Anyone being towed on water skis, aquaplane, kite skis, wakeboard, kneeboard or similar device (tube).

In 2025, we had only ten (10) instances where mandatory wear was addressed with three (3) tickets issued.

Carriage Requirement-Life jacket warnings/violations are also issued as part of the mandatory lights and equipment required under 23 VSA § 3306 Lights and equipment, (b)(1) Personal flotation devices. Basically, any vessel is required to have a USCG approved life jacket for each person on the vessel. During 2025 there were 108 occurrences with twenty-one (21) tickets issued.

Type IV PFD (throwable)-In Vermont, any vessel over sixteen (16) feet in length is required to have a USCG approved Type IV throwable floatation device (often in the form of a ring buoy or seat cushion) on board and readily accessible. During 2025 we encountered thirty-five (35) instances of this violation. No tickets were issued for this infraction.

Special Population-Paddlecraft-Kayakers, canoeists and stand-up paddleboarders make-up one of the fastest growing segments of the boating community due to the extremely low cost of entry, minimal maintenance and zero fuel costs. Unfortunately, this population is also one of the highest sources of boating fatalities due to low visibility, vessel instability and lack of experience on the water. This group is therefore at a high risk for cold water immersion, drowning and collisions with larger vessels. To address this high level of risk, we make a point of interfacing with the paddling community whenever possible, especially at boat ramps and fishing access points to reinforce the importance of safety, including PFD wear, not just possession.