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## New Law Requires Skippers To Use Engine Cutoff Device

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**Federal safety rule, which goes into effect April 1, 2021, applies to boats less than 26 feet operating at plane or above displacement speed.**

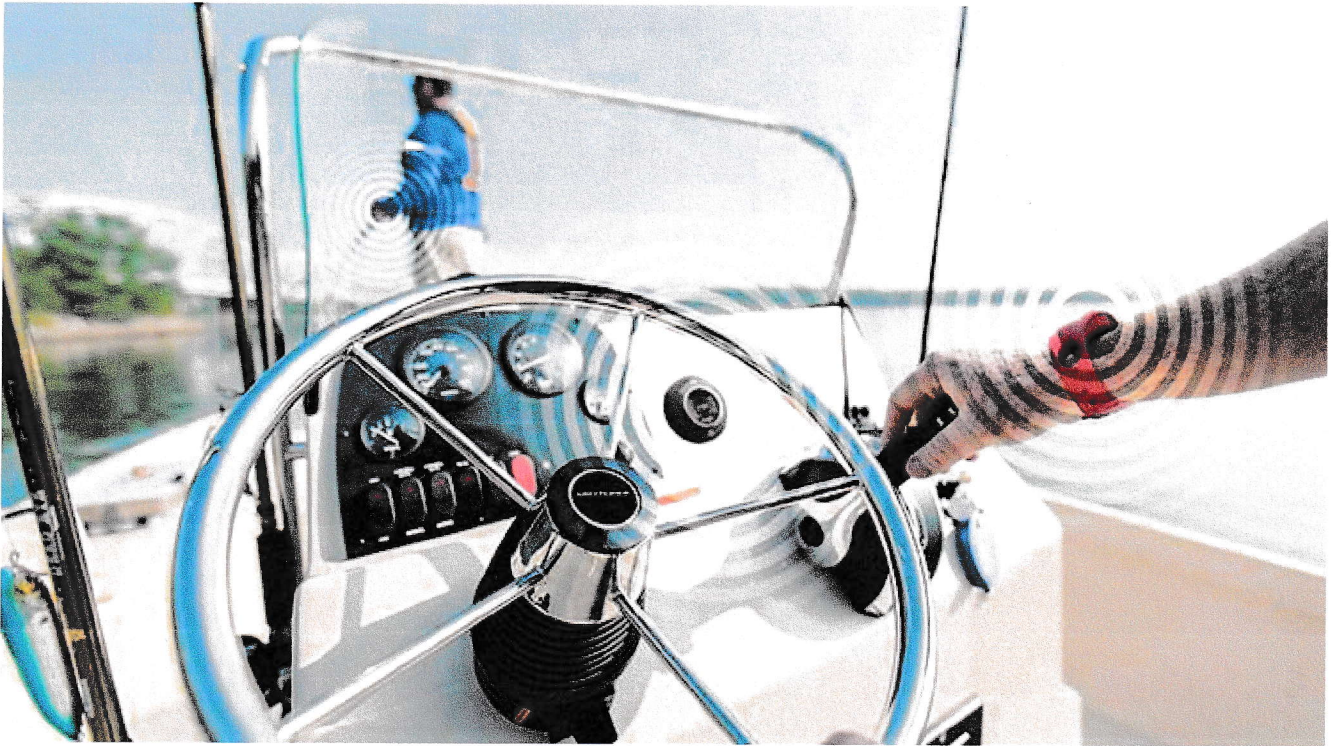


Photo: NASBLA

Too many small powerboat operators leave the lanyard to the engine cutoff switch dangling uselessly unattached to the skipper. A new law, effective April 1, 2021, should go a long way to remedying that safety hazard.

Engine cutoff device wear requirements for recreational boat operators are part of the January 1, 2021, passage of the National Defense Authorization Act, which included a U.S. Coast Guard Reauthorization. These devices, commonly referred to as engine cutoff switches (ECOS) are designed to prevent a boat-strike injury if an operator is accidentally ejected overboard while underway.

Engine cutoff devices can be located at the helm of the boat or on the tiller or body of an outboard engine, and typically connect a boat's operator to the cutoff switch with a lanyard. [Some new ECOS device](#) eliminate the lanyard and rely on wireless proximity devices to shut down an engine if the operator goes overboard. Use of these wireless devices, an electronic "fob" worn by the operator that turn off the engine when submerged in water, are also acceptable under the new rule.



*The wireless Fell Marine MOB+ stops the engine when activated by water submersion. (Photo: Fell Marine)*

Section 8316 of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2021 requires a vessel operator to use ECOS on certain vessels less than 26 feet when traveling on plane or above displacement speed.

Exceptions to the ECOS requirement include if the main helm of the vessel is in an enclosed cabin or the vessel is not operating on plane or at displacement speed. Low-speed activities such as trolling or docking do not require use of an ECOS. The vessel operator is also exempt if the boat's motor produces less than 115 pounds of static thrust — or about the size of a 3-hp engine.

The new rule applies to all navigable waterways. Current federal law preempts states from enacting or enforcing a law on a subject that is different from a federal law on the same subject. States also cannot enforce federal law. The [National Safe Boating Council notes that the U.S. Coast Guard expects to reach out to the seven states](#) (Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Louisiana, Nevada, New Jersey, and Texas) that currently have some form of ECOS requirement to determine enforcement. In the 43 states without ECOS rules, it's expected that a new ECOS law violation would be adjudicated in federal court. While boat operators who fail to follow the new requirement could face a \$100 civil penalty for the first offense, BoatUS expects the Coast Guard's initial focus will be education.

Boaters are encouraged to check the U.S. Coast Guard website for [additional information on this new use requirement](#) and other safety regulations and recommendations.

"BoatUS supports responsible use of cutoff devices and wants to get the word out to boaters to be aware of this new requirement so they may prepare," said BoatUS Manager of Government Affairs David Kennedy. "We believe the new requirement allows recreational boaters to operate their vessels in a practical manner while increasing boating safety."

Kennedy suggests boat operators double check to see that their engine cutoff switch is working and begin the season by getting into a good habit of wearing it.

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Published: March 2021

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A journalist by training, BoatUS Magazine Senior Editor Rich Armstrong has worked in TV news, and at several newspapers, then spent 18 years as a top editor at other boating publications. He's built a stellar reputation in the marine industry as one of the most thorough reporters in our business. At BoatUS Magazine, Rich handles everything from boat and product innovation and late-breaking news, to compelling feature stories, boat reviews, and features on people and places. The New Jersey shore and lakes of lower New York defined Rich's childhood. But when he bought a 21-foot Four Winns deck boat and introduced his young family to the Connecticut River, his love for the world of boats flourished from there.

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