

POLICY PRIORITIES

2026

WATERWAYS ACCESS INITIATIVE



**National Marine
Manufacturers Association**



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CHECKLIST:

How policymakers can support boating and fishing:

✓ Reauthorize the **Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund**

✓ Include important reforms when renewing the **Water Resources Development Act**

✓ Reauthorize the **National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund**

✓ **Modernize** fisheries management and **support** technological advancements

ACCESS MATTERS

A UNIQUELY AMERICAN TRADITION

Since our nation's founding, recreational boating and fishing have been deeply woven into the American experience. George Washington was an avid fisherman who cast lines in the Potomac along the shores of Mount Vernon. Andrew Jackson built boats in Tennessee before becoming president. And across history, a variety of iconic images—from John F. Kennedy sailing the coast of Cape Cod to George H.W. Bush fishing annually in the Florida Keys—have become etched into the American consciousness, reflecting an enduring connection to our coastlines, waterways, and outdoor heritage.

Today, recreational boating and fishing remain popular pastimes for more than 85 million Americans each year. In addition to offering the opportunity for relaxation and bonding with friends and family, recreational boating and fishing are also major economic drivers that support local communities and regions through millions of jobs and businesses.

The foundation of recreational boating is access. In other words, the ability to access boat ramps, marinas, parking lots, healthy and robust fisheries, and properly dredged waterways is critical to enabling *every person* to experience this uniquely American pastime. Unfortunately, much of our nation's aging outdoor recreation infrastructure is currently experiencing rapid wear and tear.

Without renovation and expansion, the damage will extend not only to America's national pastimes but also to the numerous communities along rivers, lakes, harbors, and coastlines that depend on recreational boating to drive tourism, support small businesses, and create jobs.

Fortunately, policymakers can do something about it. NMMA has outlined several different areas that policymakers can prioritize to improve recreational boating infrastructure, spur private investment in publicly managed areas, modernize fisheries management, and provide longer-term certainty for recreational marine businesses and future generations of boaters and anglers.



BOATING AND FISHING: BY THE NUMBERS

- Recreational boating and fishing are the number one driver of the U.S. outdoor recreation economy, which accounts for **\$1.3 trillion** in economic impact, **2.4 percent** of GDP, and **5.2 million** American jobs.
- Recreational boating alone generates **\$230 billion** in annual economic activity and employs more than **812,000 people** across **36,000** U.S. businesses.
- Recreational boat building is a uniquely made-in-America industry, with **95% of boats** sold in the U.S. made in the U.S.
- Approximately **93% of boat builders** are small businesses.
- Anglers generate **\$2 billion** annually for fisheries conservation, habitat restoration and angler & boater access efforts in the U.S.

80%

The percentage of boat owners who face congestion at their primary access point; 83% say it limits their boating at least sometimes.

SPORT FISH RESTORATION & BOATING TRUST FUND

The Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund is a user-pay, public benefit system created by recreational boaters, anglers, and manufacturers in 1950 to fund critical conservation programs and recreational boating infrastructure in all 50 states. The Trust Fund receives more than \$750 million each year and serves as the backbone of funding for each state's fish and wildlife agency.

The Trust Fund is fully funded by those who use it: primarily via excise taxes on motorboat fuel, small engines, and sportfishing equipment, as well as duties on certain imports such as canoes and boats, fishing license and boat registration fees, and other products. That's why the program has always received strong bipartisan support.

With the Trust Fund set to expire on September 30, 2026, it is critical that Congress pass a reauthorization bill that continues support for infrastructure and conservation projects in all 50 states.



POLICYMAKERS CAN PROTECT ACCESS TO BOATING AND FISHING BY:

Passing H.R.3858/S.4250, the Sport Fish Reauthorization bill, which would extend the program for another five years and modernize it by incentivizing investments in marina infrastructure for strategic maritime fuel.

Efficient Use of Taxpayer Dollars

The Trust Fund is fully paid for by the boaters and anglers who use it.

How are Trust Fund Dollars Used

The Trust Fund has generated **\$11 billion** since its creation and receives more than **\$750 million** each year, which go to:

- ✓ **State Fish and Wildlife Agencies:** Serves as the backbone of wildlife conservation funding for agencies in all 50 states.
- ✓ **U.S. Coast Guard:** Funds the recreational boating safety program, industry safety and technology standards, and state boating safety and law enforcement programs.

✓ **Infrastructure:** Provides funding for marinas and communities to build, maintain, and renovate boat ramps and marina infrastructure.

✓ **Coastal Wetlands:** Funds coastal wetland restoration to support and rebuild key fishery habitats and ecosystems.

✓ **Access Points:** Maintains more than **9,000** boating and fishing access points across the U.S.

Examples:



Big Bend State Recreation Area—Laughlin, NV

Photo credit: the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources



Sport Fish Restoration funding helped restore and protect water access at Big Bend State Recreation Area, a key gateway to the Colorado River in southern Nevada. With \$590,150 in SFR funding and a \$196,717 state match, the project addressed major erosion and drainage issues, dredged lagoon

sediment to maintain safe boating depths, reinforced the beach retaining wall, restored the beach landing area, and added a new wood boat dock with ADA-accessible pathways connecting visitors to shade structures, restrooms, and the beach.

The project shows how the Trust Fund helps keep public waters open, safe, and well maintained. In a region that welcomes more than 3 million visitors each year, Big Bend provides reliable Colorado River access for powerboaters, anglers, paddlers, swimmers, and families seeking relief from extreme desert heat. The investment also supports long-term maintenance, helping ensure one of the nation's driest states can continue offering clean, safe, and dependable access to outdoor recreation.



McQuade Public Access & Small Craft Harbor—Lake Superior, MN

Photo credit: the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources



Sport Fish Restoration funding helped support McQuade Public Access & Small Craft Harbor, a critical access point along Minnesota's rugged Lake Superior shoreline. With \$100,000 in SFR support, the project helped improve safe and reliable access through a three-lane boat launch, height-adjustable docks, a kayak launch connecting

to the Lake Superior State Water Trail, a protected harbor basin, emergency and staging docks, parking, restrooms, shore fishing areas, and pedestrian and vehicle access under Highway 61.

The project shows how the Trust Fund supports both recreation and safety. McQuade provides one of the few safe harbors along this cliff-lined stretch of Lake Superior, where weather and water conditions can change quickly. Today, the site supports heavy seasonal use by anglers, boaters, paddlers, and families, while also strengthening Minnesota's broader public access system of more than 1,600 sites statewide.



Green Pond Landing & Event Center—Anderson County, SC

Photo credit: the government of Anderson County, SC



Sport Fish Restoration funding helped transform Green Pond Landing & Event Center on Lake Hartwell into one of the nation's premier destinations for fishing tournaments and recreational boating. With \$2.4 million invested across multiple phases, the project supported construction of a three-lane boat ramp, 200 truck and trailer spaces,

100 single-car spaces, ADA-accessible features, a two-story restroom facility, and additional tournament infrastructure designed to handle large vessels and high-volume events.

The results show how the Trust Fund delivers for communities, anglers, and boaters. Green Pond Landing has hosted the Bassmaster Classic in 2015, 2018, and 2022, as well as the 398-team High School Fishing World Finals, which awarded more than \$3 million in scholarships. Today, the facility is recognized as one of the top tournament venues in the country, driving economic activity through lodging, fuel, food, tourism, and outdoor recreation while providing safe, reliable public access to the water.

LEGACY RESTORATION FUND

In 2020, Congress passed the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) to create the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (Legacy Restoration Fund).

This Fund provides billions of dollars towards maintenance backlog projects for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management.

Since its creation, the Fund has helped ensure safety and access by repairing critical infrastructure across America's public lands and waters.

Projects funded by the initiative have revitalized campgrounds, repaired trail systems, modernized water infrastructure, and enhanced access to recreation across all 50 states.

Since the Legacy Restoration Fund expired in September 2025, it is more important than ever that policymakers work together to ensure we continue restoring access to America's public lands.

Key Facts

- ✓ The Department of Interior's deferred maintenance and repair **backlog for projects** through the Legacy Restoration Fund totals **approximately \$40 billion**.
- ✓ The Legacy Restoration Fund only receives up to \$1.9 billion per year through FY 2025.
- ✓ Nearly 400 projects have been funded **across all 50 states**.
- ✓ **Estimated 17,000 jobs** are supported annually through Legacy Restoration Fund projects.

POLICYMAKERS CAN PROTECT ACCESS TO BOATING AND FISHING BY:

Passing the America the Beautiful Act (S.1547), which would reauthorize the program for eight years and address the \$40 billion that our national parks and public lands and waters are facing in deferred maintenance.

Maintenance backlog: \$40 BILLION

National parks and public lands and waters are facing a massive backlog in deferred maintenance.

Examples:



Dale Bumpers White River National Wildlife Refuge Boat Launch Repairs

Photo credit: USFWS



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service completed repairs to a boat launch at Dale Bumpers White River National Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas as part of broader work to modernize outdoor recreation access facilities and transportation assets.

Source: U.S. Department of the Interior



Carbella Boat Launch Ramp Replacement

Photo credit: BLM



The Bureau of Land Management replaced the boat launch ramp at Carbella in Montana's Western Montana District, helping improve safe, reliable access to the water for boaters and other recreation users.

Source: U.S. Department of the Interior

WATER RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT ACT

While boaters also contribute to conservation and infrastructure through user-funded programs such as the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund, the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) complements these investments by strengthening federal water infrastructure and improving access at waters managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).

USACE recreation sites are among the nation’s leading providers of public boating access. With roughly 269 million visits annually, Corps-managed waters play a critical role in connecting families to the outdoors. Aging docks, limited boat ramp parking, deferred maintenance, and outdated lease structures are increasingly limiting safe and reliable access.

WRDA reauthorization presents an opportunity to modernize current policies and ensure federal recreation sites can keep pace with demand.

Key Facts

- ✓ **400 lake and river projects** are managed by USACE Recreation sites.
- ✓ **210,000 jobs** supported by USACE lake and river projects.
- ✓ **1 in 10 Americans** visit USACE recreation projects annually.
- ✓ **3,732 boat ramps** supported by the USACE.
- ✓ **269 million** is the total number of visits to USACE facilities each year.
- ✓ **107,575 marina slips** at USACE managed sites.



POLICYMAKERS CAN PROTECT ACCESS TO BOATING AND FISHING BY:

Passing a strong, bipartisan WRDA reauthorization that protects boating access, strengthens infrastructure, supports American marinas, and incentivizes long-term investments in communities.

WRDA PRIORITIES

These reforms are about helping marine businesses invest in facilities, quickly respond to community needs, and ensure Americans are not locked out of public waters due to outdated policies or aging infrastructure.

➤ **Allow the Army Corps to reinvest the recreation fees paid by recreational boaters and anglers in those boating access sites**

Include original LAKES Act language so that retained fees supplement—rather than supplant—annual appropriations, allowing USACE to reinvest in facilities consistently and predictably.

The Lake Access Keeping Economies Strong (LAKES) Act took important steps to improve outdoor recreation facilities in USACE-managed areas. While it provides new opportunities for public-private investments, more flexibility is needed to reinvest resources and meet local community needs.

Currently, USACE is only allowed to retain recreation fees until it receives its annual appropriations. A fix is needed for the USACE to continue retaining recreation fees (like other federal agencies) in addition to its regular appropriations.

➤ **Align USACE recreation data standards with other federal land and water agencies**

Ensure USACE databases are standardized with other agencies to make data about public waters more accessible to boaters and anglers that visit USACE sites.

Federal agencies have begun digitizing water and fishing access and recreational use information on federal waterways and lands through the passage of the MAPWaters Act.

These resources will be made available to the public to help clarify complex rules and regulations. With around 269 million Americans visiting USACE recreation sites, USACE participation in the interagency standards development from the beginning is critical.

➤ **Modernize USACE lease terms to encourage long-term private investment in marinas**

Implement a longer-term lease model (50 years) tied to consistent

compliance, shifting focus from fixed terms to continuous performance standards.

Marinas are often undercapitalized and require significant investment for lease renewals. As material costs have risen, replacing docks can cost \$1 million or more, and large marinas may need multi-million-dollar investments to sustain or upgrade facilities.

A longer-term, performance-based lease model is necessary to provide stability for businesses and the communities they serve.

➤ **Streamline approvals for marina improvements by creating a tiered review process**

Allow routine, minor upgrades to move forward within 30 days when clear criteria are met.

Historically, USACE leases have required approval for all property subleases and development projects, even when replacing existing docks and amenities. This lengthy process often takes months or over a year, hindering operators seeking to sublease or upgrade facilities. These issues can be alleviated by adopting a tiered review system where routine subleases and minor improvements can receive expedited approval if predefined criteria are met.

71%

The percentage of boaters who have already changed their behavior because of access challenges. Respondents state access challenges have made them boat less, travel farther, or spend less.



WHY RECREATIONAL FISHING MATTERS TO BOATING

The continued success of the recreational marine industry depends on recreational boaters and anglers having robust access to public waters, abundant fisheries, and healthy marine ecosystems.

Most boat outings involve recreational fishing, and recreational anglers provide significant economic benefits to coastal communities through fishing charters and guide services, marinas, tackle shops, manufacturers, and other shore-side support businesses.

Those economic benefits are also seen across the thousands of American businesses throughout the nation that manufacture or sell recreational boating and fishing equipment. The recent Bureau of Economic Analysis report noted that recreational boating and fishing are the number one contributor to the \$1.3 trillion outdoor recreation economy.

Barriers and restrictions on access to waterways and fishing directly affect participation in boating and fishing along with the coastal communities and domestic manufacturing jobs that support it.

Policymakers have the opportunity to strengthen this powerful segment of the economy through common sense legislation and regulatory modernization.

POLICYMAKERS CAN PROTECT ACCESS TO BOATING AND FISHING BY:

Partnering with industry to advance new technologies and modernize fisheries management and data collection, while working with marine manufacturers to invest in the innovations needed to ensure healthy fisheries and abundant access.



93%

The percentage of boaters who say improved access would increase their boating frequency; 51% say it would increase significantly.

FISHERIES PRIORITIES

➤ **Maintain and increase access to recreational boating and fishing**

- Policymakers should continue prioritizing the review of the existing 2008 North Atlantic Right Whale Vessel Strike Reduction Rule to incorporate technology;
- Improving the best available science and reinforcing congressional intent under the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act; and
- Determining next steps to manage species conservation without sacrificing commerce or ocean access.

➤ **Rebalance regulations to account for the socio-economic impact of boating and fishing industries**

- Any regulation or rule affecting access to recreational fisheries must consider the full scope of potential economic impacts of all affected industries and stakeholders.
- Improve socio-economic data collection and include boat and sportfishing equipment manufacturing, sales, such as tackle shops, boat dealers and repair shops, marinas, and other shore-side support businesses.

➤ **Pass the Whale CHARTS Act to continue partnering with marine manufacturers and invest in new technology**

- In 2024, the Vessel Strike Avoidance Fund was established to accelerate the technologies outlined above, yet it requires consistent authority and reliable funding to succeed.
- This bill would ensure that NOAA continues its partnership with the industry and prioritizes supporting and expanding this fund to ensure practical, outcome-driven solutions are implemented on a scale.

➤ **Modernize fisheries management, science, and data accuracy to ensure healthy fisheries and abundant access**

Policymakers and NOAA should adopt a clear pathway by which states, or regional compacts, can assume more management authority over recreational fisheries. For example, policymakers should:

- Support state-level data systems so that state-derived metrics can be relied on for federal-level science and stock assessments;

- Promote pilot programs in additional regions to assess state-led management for species, building upon the success of Red Snapper projects; and
- Require interoperability and data-sharing standards so state and federal datasets can be integrated for assessment, enforcement, and transparency.
- Build upon the Modern Fish Act's encouragement of alternatives to federal fisheries management approaches, including allowing flexible management and accounting for variability and uncertainty.
- Invest and encourage citizen science, such as more collaborative, cost-effective projects involving recreational anglers to help with surveys and data collection that leverages existing vessels and expertise.
- Change NOAA's tag and permit fee policies so that fees are provided to the Region where collected, which would allow for dedicated revenues to support local fishery and data improvement projects.

➤ **Pass the MAPOceans Act to enhance access and improve recreational public water data**

- Congress should pass the Modernizing Access to Our Public Oceans (MAPOceans) Act (H.R.3340/S.759) to modernize public access to data for recreational boaters and anglers, helping boaters and anglers stay up to date with changing regulations and latest opportunities on our nation's marine waters.

➤ **Pass the SHARKED Act to help reduce depredation**

- Congress should pass the SHARKED Act (H.R.207/S.2314) to establish a task force that improves coordination and communication across the federal fisheries community on shark depredation and identifies opportunities to limit depredation throughout the country.

66%

The percentage of boaters who rate waterway maintenance as extremely important; 64% were affected by water levels, dredging, or debris in the past year.

Key Actions for Congress:

- ✓ Pass the Whale CHARTS Act of 2026 (H.R.7332)
- ✓ Pass the MAPOceans Act (H.R.3340/S.759)
- ✓ Pass the SHARKED Act of 2025 (H.R.207/S.2314)

54%

The percentage of non-owners who say cost is the biggest barrier to owning a boat. Yet 49% plan to buy a boat, 36% would buy with more storage, and 23% with a boat ramp closer to home.

ENDNOTES

Boating and Fishing By the Numbers:

Industry economic data:

<https://www.nmma.org/advocacy/economic-impact/recreational-boating>

Outdoor recreation data:

<https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>

Legacy Restoration Fund: <https://www.doi.gov/gaoa-impact>

Water Resources Development Act

U.S. Army Corps Key Facts:

<https://www.iwr.usace.army.mil/Missions/Value-to-the-Nation/Recreation/>

<https://www.iwr.usace.army.mil/Missions/Value-to-the-Nation/Recreation/Recreation-Recreational-Facilities>

Fisheries

NOAA-NFWF Vessel Strike Avoidance Fund:

<https://www.nfwf.org/programs/vessel-strike-avoidance-fund>

South Atlantic States Action Plan:

https://sportfishingpolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/SA-states-letter_Atlantic-red-snapper-state-management-to-Cong-task-force_09-12-2025.pdf

