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**Statement of Thomas O’Keefe, PhD  
On behalf of American Whitewater**

**Washington State Senate  
Committee on Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources, and Parks  
Kevin Van De Wege (D), Chair  
Judy Warnick (R), Ranking Member**

**PUBLIC HEARING ON Proposed Substitute Senate Bill 5176  
January 27th, 2021, 1:30 PM  
Concerning Boater Safety Education  
Sponsor: Van De Wege**

Chair Van De Wege, Ranking Member Warnick, and members of the Committee, my name is Thomas O’Keefe, and I am the Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director for American Whitewater. American Whitewater is opposed to SB 5176.

American Whitewater is a national non-profit 501(c)(3) river conservation organization founded in 1954 with a mission is to protect and restore America’s whitewater rivers and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely. The organization is the primary advocate for the preservation and protection of whitewater rivers throughout the United States, and water safety is a central component of our mission.

We appreciate the attention the legislature, and your Committee has placed on boating safety; this is an important discussion. Washington State has been at the forefront of these discussions nationally and I wish to acknowledge and recognize the great work of the Washington State Drowning Prevention Network and the Washington State Parks Boating Safety Program.

*The Primary Issue: A Need to Encourage Wider Usage of Personal Floatation Devices*

Data from the most recent Coast Guard Recreational Boating Statistics Report show that:<sup>1</sup>

- 79 percent of fatal boating accident victims drowned,
- 86 percent of drowning victims were not wearing a life jacket,
- alcohol was a contributing factor accounting for 23 percent of total fatalities.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://uscgboating.org/statistics/accident\\_statistics.php](https://uscgboating.org/statistics/accident_statistics.php)

We need to:

- Focus on changing paddlesports culture to encourage increased adoption of personal floatation devices through active promotion of the Wear It Campaign of the National Safe Boating Council.
- Ensure that the Life Jacket Loaner Program, that was suspended in 2020, is immediately reinstated.

Key Concerns With Bill As Drafted:

- The findings Section 1 is misleading and incorrect. This section notes that Washington has “diverse waterways” that “require different skills” yet the legislation makes no meaningful acknowledgement of this fact. The statement that “Washington has the fifth highest rate of boating-related deaths” is incorrect. While Washington may have the fifth highest number of deaths, the actual rate is dependent on the number of participants. The section also states that the number of fatalities “have increased recently.” For the past decade, Washington State has had an average of 11 non-motorized boating fatalities with no increase in this number. In that same time, participation rate in paddlesports and state population has increased and the fatality rate has declined; it is now well below 1 fatality per 100,000.
- A state-mandated education program is inconsistent with how safety training is provided for human-powered activities in our state and across the nation. Mountain biking, backcountry skiing, rock climbing, and even hiking all have risks and every year accidents in these sports result in fatalities. As with paddlesports, all of these sports require safety training that is provided by businesses and organizations. For paddlesports, several businesses and organizations provide safety training that is uniquely tailored to the diverse waterways and different skills used to enjoy them.
- The legislation does not include inner tubes, air mattresses, sailboards, and small rafts or flotation devices or toys customarily used by swimmers. Washington State Department of Health data indicate that of Washington State residents who died from unintentional drowning, 10-20% were boating accidents, with a smaller percentage representing those who were engaged in human-powered boating. The legislation does not address the primary issue.
- Section 4 would allow an individual to operate a motor driven boat with a boater education card or a human-propelled vessel boater education card.

The data are clear: the most impactful way to address paddlesports fatalities and improve safety is to aggressively focus on encouraging more widespread use of personal floatation devices. This bill

is a distraction and does not appropriately consider the extensive expertise in paddlesports safety among professionals in this field who live, work, and recreate in Washington State.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before your Committee today. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully Submitted.

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