

Docks quiet for now, Maine marinas make plans to stay afloat

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By Tux Turkel Staff Writer



A worker pressure-washes the docks at Freedom Boat Club in Yarmouth on Monday. Slips normally would be starting to fill up by this time of year, but uncertainty over the coronavirus has marina operators in uncharted waters.

Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

YARMOUTH — Motorists whizzing across the Interstate 295 bridge over the Royal River at this time of year are accustomed to glancing at a harbinger of summer on the Maine coast — the daily progression of recreational boats being moored in the anchorage and docked at the three marinas lining the tidal shores.

But in this pandemic spring, the scene is strikingly different.

Few more than a handful of vessels were dockside early this week, an indicator of how the state's 40 or so major marinas have been forced to back off the throttle as they try to navigate uncharted waters.

They all want to know: When can we open for the season, and under what guidelines?

And they can't really wait for a definitive answer.

Maine's coastal marinas need to ramp up quickly in April, propelled by a rising tide of demand for bottom painting, system checking and vessel launching. Facing a short season that peaks on Independence Day and starts a slow ebb as school begins, marina managers know that every boat owner wants to be in the water yesterday. So even in this unprecedented spring, the frantic shuffle of moving ready boats out of the yard to make way for parking, and for other boats to come out of storage, is well underway.

It's just all happening against a backdrop of uncertainty.

"My biggest fear," said Steve Arnold, owner of Yarmouth Boat Yard, "is having everything shut down for an extended period of time, into July or August. I don't see that happening, but I'm taking it one day at a time."

Arnold was encouraged by news last weekend that the governors in the epicenter of the pandemic – New York, New Jersey and Connecticut – had jointly announced that marinas and boatyards in their states could reopen for personal use. Charter operations and rental fleets will remain shut down, for the time being.



Capt. Henry Porter uncovers boats Monday at Yarmouth Boat Yard while preparing them for the season. Maine's recreational boating industry is awaiting an uncertain season with new rules necessitated by the coronavirus outbreak.
Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

That gave Arnold, who also owns Moose Landing Marina on Brandy Pond in Naples and three Freedom Boat Club locations, some hope. It makes it more likely that Maine also will be able to relax some restrictions before the boating season begins in earnest.

Because for now, Yarmouth Boat Yard is largely off limits to boaters, primarily to keep the public at a safe distance from workers.

NAVIGATING THE RULES

Marinas and boatyards are an essential part of Maine's recreational boating industry, which generates \$2.9 billion a year in spending that includes supplies, sales and services. Boating is an economic engine that supports 593 businesses and more than 14,000 jobs, according to the Maine Marine Trades Association.

But this spring, marinas and boaters are trying to make out the shape of pandemic-inspired rules that in certain cases seem to be shrouded in fog.

For instance, boat builders are on the state's list of essential business operations. Marinas aren't, per se, but they can be. Yarmouth Boat Yard has a letter posted on its office door from the Department of Economic and Community Development saying both Yarmouth and Moose Landing meet the definition of essential.



Caleb Hewss washes one of the boats for sale Monday at Yarmouth Boat Yard. Steve Arnold, the owner of Yarmouth Boat Yard, said, "My biggest fear is having everything shut down for an extended period of time, into July or August."

Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

Stacey Keefer, executive director of the trade group, said marinas that help maintain boats for commercial fishing fleets, harbormasters and other law enforcement agencies can be deemed essential.

"A lot of marinas are looking to us for guidance," she said, "but it may be case by case."

Boaters also may be confused. Across the turning basin from Yarmouth Boat Yard, the docks at the town landing are in place and the launch ramp is open.

Mark Latti, spokesman for the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, said boating and fishing are considered essential activities.

"All our boat ramps are open," Latti said. "We ask that everyone follow the governor's executive orders regarding social distancing."

That can be complicated for fishing buddies. Distancing includes the drive to the ramp, perhaps in a separate vehicle, as well as being afloat, with someone who's not from your household. That requires a boat large enough to keep such passengers at least 6 feet apart at all times.

"If you cannot do this," Latti said, "we tell people they should not be in the same boat with that person."

Distancing guidelines are bound to stay in place this summer. So marina operators are developing plans for how they'll handle interactions at the gas dock and sanitize rental boats and other shared watercraft.

PREP WORK CONTINUES

But for now, the emphasis at marinas is on prepping boats and keeping work crews on the job. The process was well underway at Yarmouth Boat Yard on Monday.

A tractor operator was moving one of the 260 stored boats for service and hull washing. A forklift driver was tipping a 22-foot center console fishing boat to drain water from the bilge before taking it to the service building. Another worker was tugging shrink-wrap off a 24-foot center console that just came from a remote storage yard in Cumberland.

On the docks, two workers were power-washing the piers, making them ready to stain. In a normal season, boats already would be at some of the 110 slips, and that chore couldn't be done.

Similar work is happening next door at Yankee Marina & Boatyard, with an eye toward distancing.

At 7:05 a.m., the service manager conducted a quick meeting with employees at their work stations via two-way radio. Masks are standard equipment, and door handles are sanitized twice daily at the 90-slip marina.

"I want my crew to keep working, but I want to keep them safe," said Deborah Delp, the company's president and a registered nurse.

There has been speculation this spring that some boaters might be less likely to get on the water amid job losses and investment worries. A handful of boat owners at Yankee are delaying their launch dates, Delp said, but the majority actually want to be in as early as possible. Boating, she observed, fosters mental health and is way for families to be together.

"The water is a safe place to be," she said. "We all need an escape now from our homes. A marina and boating is a great place to do that."

Wednesday's snow squalls and stiff winds were a reminder that boating weather hasn't quite arrived on the Maine coast. But by mid-May, many recreational boaters will be eager to cast off, so the next few weeks will be crucial for coastal marinas.

"I'm cautiously optimistic that with New York, New Jersey and Connecticut opening their boatyards and marinas, maybe Gov. (Janet) Mills will do something similar," said Keefer, with the Marine Trades Association.

To help marinas prepare, the trade association is offering [online guidance](#) that includes safe operating practices for boaters and crew. In a boating season like no other, this is the theme: Marinas typically are social gathering places. This summer, their role is to be a safe gateway to the water.