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S.F. No. 553 – Safety Education Requirement and Certain Watercraft Operators Permission

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Overview. Effective July 1, 2025, SF 553 requires certain watercraft operators to obtain a watercraft operator’s permit by completing a water safety course and written test administered by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The bill also imposes certain requirements on businesses that rent personal watercraft and other motorboats. Finally, the bill also reorganizes some of the affected statutes. The bill, therefore, includes a substantial amount of both new and existing statutory language, as noted below.

Section 1 – Definitions		
Defines terms that are used throughout the bill		
Subdivision	Term Defined	Description
Subd. 2 Lines 1.12 to 1.16	“Accompanying Operator”	Creates a new term to describe a permit exemption that exists in current law (MS §§ 86B.305, 86B.313, subd. 3) when an operator is accompanied by a person who has a watercraft operator’s permit.
Subd. 3 Lines 1.17 to 1.22	“Adult Operator”	Defines who will be required to obtain an operator’s permit. Existing law requires 12-17 years olds to obtain a permit, but this definition will eventually require all persons 12 and older who were born after June 30, 1987, to obtain a permit, after a phased-in effective date.
Subd. 4 Lines 2.1 to 2.11	“Exempt Operator”	Defines motorboat operators who are exempt from permit requirements. All exemptions are new except for the exemption for operation during an emergency.
Subd. 5 Lines 2.12 to 2.15	“Motorboat Rental Business”	New term defines a motorboat rental business as a person engaged in the business of renting motorboats or personal watercraft for terms of fewer than 30 days.

Subd. 6 Lines 2.16 to 2.17	“Young Operator”	Creates a new term for a class of operator that is described in existing law (MS § 86B.305, subd. 1)
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Section 2 – Issuance of Watercraft Operator’s Permit		
Requires the commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to issue a watercraft operator’s permit to a person 12 years of age or older (an “adult operator”) who completes the watercraft safety course and test administered by the DNR (or a similar course approved by the DNR)		
Subdivision/Lines	New or Existing Law?	Description
Subd. 1 Lines 2.20 to 2.24	Existing Law (§ 86B.101, subd. 2)	Requires DNR to issue a watercraft operator’s permit to a person age 12 or older who completes a DNR-administered safety course and test.
Subd. 2 Lines 2.25 to 2.27	New	Allows DNR to issue a watercraft operator’s permit to a person who is 11 but the permit is not valid until the permittee is 12.
Subd. 3. Lines 2.28 to 3.7	New	Requires personal possession of a watercraft operator’s permit and display to a conservation officer upon request.
Subd. 4 Lines 3.8 to 3.13	New	Makes conservation officers immune from liability for inadvertent damage to electronic devices when a person uses such a device to display a watercraft operator’s permit to the officer; clarifies that using a device to display a permit does not constitute consent for the officer to access other contents on the device.

Section 3 – Motorboat Operation		
Governs the operation of a motorboat by adult operators (persons 12 years of age or older) and by young operators (persons younger than 12 years of age)		
Subdivision/Lines	New or Existing Law?	Description
Subd. 1 Lines 3.17 to 3.21	New	Requires adult operators to possess a watercraft operator’s permit or to be accompanied by an accompanying operator to operate a motorboat. Does not apply to exempt operators.
Subd. 2 Lines 3.22 to 3.24	Existing Law (§ 86B.305, subd. 1)	Prohibits young operators from operating a motorboat unless there is an accompanying operator. If an accompanying operator is present, a young operator may operate a motorboat regardless of its horsepower. Repeals the existing exemption for less than 25 horsepower motorboats.
Subd. 3. Lines 3.25 to 3.27	Existing Law (§ 86B.305, subd. 1 & 2)	Clarifies that for purposes of the driving while impaired statutes, an accompanying operator as well as the actual operator are in physical control of a motorboat.
Subd. 4 Lines 3.28 to 3.29	Existing Law (§ 86B.305, subd. 3)	Prohibits owners from allowing watercraft to be operated in violation of this section.

Section 4 – Watercraft Safety Program		
Requires the DNR to establish a water safety course and testing program for personal watercraft and watercraft		
Paragraph/Lines	New or Existing Law?	Description
Paragraph (a) Lines 4.2 to 4.12	Existing Law (§ 86B.101, subd. 1, 2, & 3)	Requires the DNR to establish a water safety course and testing program for personal watercraft and watercraft operators.
Paragraph (b) Lines 4.13 to 4.17	New	Requires DNR to create a short boater safety examination to be administered by motorboat rental businesses to renters of motorboats

Section 5 – Motorboat Rental Business		
Imposes various requirements on motorboat rental businesses		
Subdivision/Lines	New or Existing Law?	Description
Subd. 1 Lines 4.20 to 4.24	New	Prohibits a motorboat rental business from renting a motorboat to a person unless the person has a watercraft operator’s permit or is an exempt operator and is at least 18 years old.
Subd. 2 Lines 4.25 to 4.28	New	Requires a motorboat rental business to create a list of authorized users and to prohibit unauthorized users from operating the motorboat.
Subd. 3 Lines 4.29 to 5.4	New	Requires a motorboat rental business to provide a summary of applicable motorboat regulations to motorboat renters. Requires a motorboat renter to take a short, DNR-approved test on the regulations before removing a motorboat from the premises.
Subd. 4 Lines 5.5 to 5.9	Existing Law (§ 86B.313, subd. 4)	Requires a motorboat rental business to provide the renter with a personal floatation device at no cost.

Section 6 – Conforming Change

Makes a change to conform the statutes with changes made elsewhere in the bill

Section 7 – Drivers’ License Provisions

Adds language to the statutes that facilitates the inclusion of watercraft operator’s permit information on drivers’ licenses

Section 8 – Repealer

Repeals MS §§ 86B.101, 86B.305, and 86B.313, subd. 2 & 3. The contents of these statutes are incorporated into the statutes elsewhere.