

Hurricane Preparedness for Boat Owners

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Planning, preparation, and timely action are the keys to protecting your boat from hurricanes or any threatening severe weather. A boat owner/operator may be held responsible for damages caused by his vessel during a natural disaster.

Each boat owner needs a plan unique to the type of boat, the local boating environment, and the characteristics of available safe havens. A detailed action plan should include options to secure your boat, either in the marina, out of the water, or to leave the area. Given the speed and erratic nature of hurricanes it is probably not feasible for live-aboards and other owners of large boats to try to avoid the storm by going to another port. It would be better to secure the boat as well as possible and evacuate to a local shelter or, if necessary, out of the county. If you feel you must evacuate your boat you should leave at least 72 hours before the hurricane is estimated to strike the area. If you are going to a marina be sure to call ahead to assure there is room for your boat.

Hurricane moorings should be located in advance and permission obtained from appropriate persons. Plan how you will remove valuable equipment from the boat and determine how long it will take so you have plenty of time. Remember, about 25 percent of hurricane fatalities are from boaters trying to secure their vessels!

Lash down everything you cannot remove, such as tillers, wheels, booms, etc. Seal all openings with air-conditioning duct tape to make the boat as watertight as possible. Sails and Bimini tops must be removed.

Check your lease or rental agreement with the marina or storage area. Know your responsibilities and liabilities as well as those of the marina or storage area. Boats in dry storage should be lashed to their cradle with heavy lines.

Trailer boats should be lashed to their trailer and blocks placed between the frame members and axle inside each wheel to prevent damage to the suspension from water in the boat. Owners of smaller lightweight boats may want to make them heavier by partially filling the boat with water or installing drain plugs so rainwater can accumulate in the boat. They should also deflate their trailer tires by about half to lower the boat and to accommodate the heavier loads from the accumulation of water inside the boat. Finally the boat should be secured to a fixed object with heavy lines, preferable in four directions to account for wind shifts. Screw anchors secured in the ground are excellent for this purpose.

If you must trailer your boat to a safe location be sure the tires, axle, and bearings are in good condition. A flat tire, frozen bearings or a broken axle could prevent evacuation to a safe location or create an accident on the highway.

Once officials announce a hurricane warning, 24 hours prior to the expected arrival of a hurricane, no trailers will be allowed on the highway. If you are caught in traffic when this warning is announced you will be forced to leave your boat along the side of the road. If

you want to evacuate your boat from the Keys you had better plan on leaving well in advance of the hurricane warning.

Boaters should have pre-hurricane pictures of their boats for insurance purposes and these pictures, along with registration and insurance papers should be kept in a secure place.

When one considers the winds, confusion, and traffic along U.S. 1 prior to a hurricane and the potential for an accident with possible loss of life, no boat is probably worth the effort to trailer it out. It is better to get insurance, secure it, and concentrate on protecting your house and family.

Contact us for a copy of the pamphlet from Boat US, "Begin Preparing Your Boat for a Hurricane--NOW!" Additional information on hurricane preparedness in both English and Spanish is available from the American Red Cross and the Monroe County Emergency Management as well as the UF/Monroe County Extension Services Sea Grant Program, 1100 Simonton Street, Suite 2-260, Key West, FL 33040, or call toll-free: 292-4501; FAX: 305-292-4415; E-mail: monroe@ifas.ufl.edu or visit our Web site <http://monroe.ifas.ufl.edu>. Our services are free and available to all without regard to race, color, sex, or national origin.