

Montana Trooper

Ironic Priorities

By Trooper Rocky Bailey

As Montana enters a new political campaign year, we will inevitably be treated to debates, promises, and legislative philosophies between law making hopefuls concerning their strategies to balance citizenry safety and personal freedom, as well as smart enforcement of laws versus budget spending. They will hopefully ask if each law that is enacted is the best tool to protect people's health and the best use of their hard earned tax dollars. Also, they will hopefully ask if it is reasonable in its intended purpose and if it gives a measurable difference after it has been applied, or is it just a nice headline, but meaningless beyond the printing.

So, as one Montana citizen, as well as a person charged with "safeguarding the lives and property of the people using the highway traffic system of Montana," I have to ask, what costs Montana tax payers and insurance purchasing citizens more?

Is the cost for and to drivers, passengers, and family members who are killed, disabled, maimed and hospitalized from being unrestrained in motor vehicle crashes more or is the cost from killed and injured floaters without life-jackets on board their watercraft greater?

Rhetorical, I agree, but really examine it. Obviously, we have far more people traveling by motor vehicle in Montana than by watercraft. While vehicles are driving every single day, watercraft are largely floating for but a few months. There are far more drivable roads than there are navigable waterways. There are more vehicles in Montana than boats and rafts.

Yet, we have a primary law that law enforcement can stop your boat or raft just to check to see if you have a life



jacket on board for every person. We do not, however, have a primary seat belt law for law enforcement to stop a vehicle solely when they plainly see that the driver or other occupants are not wearing the greatest safety device provided.

Is personal privacy and freedom less applicable when people are floating on water than when they are moving on a public roadway?

Does it cost less to have officers take a boat out on a lake or river to look for life jackets than it does to have officers in motor vehicles stopping other drivers?

Are the enforcers of life jackets and boat registration who are riding in boats protecting people and the state's interests more than the enforcers of the highway who ride around in wheeled vehicles?

Does the rescue of an injured or drowned floater cost more than the cost

of rescuing injured and ejected motor vehicle passengers?

Has anyone asked fire departments, ambulance services, or law enforcement agencies if they spend more on watercraft rescue responses or responding to motor vehicle crashes with compounded injuries due to unrestrained occupants?

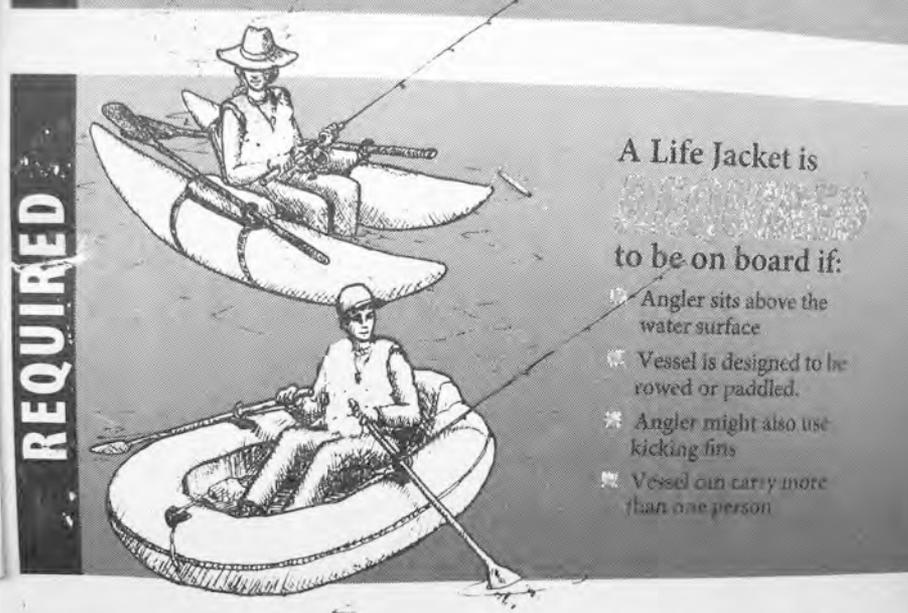
If ten percent of deaths and injuries could be prevented from more restrained motor vehicle occupants, would we not want to make that happen? Many states that have enacted primary seat belt laws have seen vehicle occupant use of seat belts increase. This translates into reduced deaths, reduced injuries, reduced ambulance runs, reduced fire personnel responses, quicker law enforcement investigations, saved insurance payment payouts, less hospitalization, less missed work, and increased tax savings.

This campaign season, I challenge every state legislator incumbent or candidate to explain why it is preferable or

more ►

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continued



REQUIRED

A Life Jacket is **REQUIRED** to be on board if:

- ☒ Angler sits above the water surface
- ☒ Vessel is designed to be rowed or paddled.
- ☒ Angler might also use kicking fins
- ☒ Vessel can carry more than one person

Montana law requires all boats to carry a U.S. Coast Guard-approved wearable type life jacket for each person on board. Children under 12 are required to wear their life jacket when on board. For boats 16 feet in length and longer, an additional Type IV throwable PFD (boat cushion or ring buoy) must also be easily accessible on board. Montana Code Annotated 23-2-521.



acceptable for a floater to be stopped, checked, boarded, and ticketed in the state of Montana for a possible life jacket violation, while motor vehicle drivers cannot be stopped solely because they are clearly not wearing their safety belts. Please explain why the hundreds of unrestrained motor vehicle deaths are less important to prevent than the dozens of un-life jacketed water craft deaths each year. □