

Lifejacket Bill

Submission



Executive summary

The draft Life Jackets for Children and Young Persons Bill is a positive step in changing behaviours but strengthening it further presents a once in a generation chance to make the people we love safer and dramatically reduce drowning deaths quickly.

It could be the most influential piece of drowning prevention legislation since New Zealand courageously introduced pool fencing rules that reduced child drowning by 80%.

We believe the Bill could be simplified, ending decades of confusion, and achieve much more by setting one simple expectation for all users (not just under 15s) of recreational watercraft (not just 6m or less).

Our submission aligns closely with that of Coastguard Tautiaki Moana and other leading water safety organisations.

We are grateful for the opportunity to submit and look forward to being able to contribute to the committee's deliberations. If more information is required, we stand ready to help.

The case for doing more

The evidence demonstrates that simply carrying a lifejacket is insufficient; the simple act of wearing one is what saves lives.

The table below summarises drowning fatalities on watercraft over the past 25 years (since the year 2000).

	Drownings on small watercraft (less than 6m in length)	Drownings on larger watercraft (6m or more in length)
Total drownings	381 people (87%)	59 people (13%)
No lifejacket drownings	288 people (86%)	47 people (14%)
Under 15s without lifejackets	10 people (91%)	1 person (9%)

- Since the year 2000, 440 people have drowned in a watercraft-related incident.
- The majority of people, 76% (335 people), were not wearing a lifejacket.
- While the draft Bill focuses on people aged under 15, an overwhelming majority of those drowning from craft are men over 40.
- While the majority of deaths occur on craft 6m or under, people on larger vessels are also 'at risk' if they don't wear lifejackets while on board and underway.
- This problem isn't solving itself. The levels of people drowning who are not wearing a lifejacket has continued at a similar rate over the past 25 years.
- If everyone wore a lifejacket on recreational craft while underway, an average of 12 lives could be saved every year, amounting to 120 lives over the next decade.

Mandating lifejackets for all, not just those under 15, will create one simple, easy to understand expectation for all New Zealanders.

While a focus on under 15s will have some benefit and slowly contribute to long-term generational change, having an easy-to-understand rule for all will result in a much quicker decrease in drowning deaths. Twelve fewer drownings each year significantly reduces economic and societal harm.

This is supported by international examples. In Tasmania deaths more than halved following mandatory lifejacket legislation and in Victoria the rates of people wearing lifejackets increased from 22% to 63%.

International evidence and research make it undeniably clear – people are three times more likely to survive if they are wearing a properly fitted lifejacket. It's a key prevention action that is no different to wearing a seatbelt, a helmet when cycling, or fencing your swimming pool.

Eliminating confusion and cost

The existing law requires lifejackets to be carried on board and worn if the skipper deems it necessary. This weak nationwide rule has led to local government responding with a confusing patchwork of regional bylaws that vary widely (see appendix for map).

- Regional variation drives confusion, which results in people not prioritising the wearing of lifejackets.
- A clear, single national rule will eliminate this confusion and help normalise a culture of lifejacket wearing for everyone.
- Survey data commissioned by Water Safety New Zealand and Surf Lifesaving in 2024 tells us that 83% of all watercraft users report always wearing a lifejacket.

- For those who don't always wear a lifejacket already, the fact that it isn't mandatory is a commonly cited reason in defence of not wearing one. A clear law addresses this gap.
- Each regional authority managing its own criteria is often an unnecessary demand on stretched local resources.
- Potential change in each region also takes many years of local consultation, debate and lead in times with final policy approval required from the Ministry of Transport. This could be eliminated with a simple national rule.

Successful precedents

New Zealand has great examples where clear legislation has changed behaviour and saved lives:

- **Pool Fencing Laws:** The introduction of pool fencing laws in the 1980s reduced child drownings by almost 80%.
- **Compulsory Seat Belts:** they had a similar effect on the survivability of vehicle crashes.

It's worth noting that the Ministry of Transport has estimated the value of each life lost to an accident is close to \$12.5m.

By supporting changes to the Bill, the committee will save the economic and, more importantly, terrible emotional damage suffered by 12 families a year.

Addressing arguments against change

As should be expected in a healthy and open democracy, calls for a clear rule mandating lifejacket wearing will be challenged by some. We welcome that. It is likely the following issues will be raised but there are answers and solutions for all.

- “This is overreach – it’s a nanny state.” Exactly like the seatbelt rules, national lifejacket legislation is about generational behavioural change, not policing and the issuing of infringement notices. It is normal for societies to make sensible rules to minimise societal cost. Drowning remains the biggest cause of recreational death. Making simple changes to this legislation will reduce the emotional and economic cost of drowning dramatically.
- “Implementation will be too costly.” We don’t believe that having a clear rule requires a large ongoing investment in enforcement. Survey data indicates 83% of New Zealanders already wear lifejackets and this change is about nudging the

culture along so that the remaining 17% change what they do. Yes, there will be upfront costs in communicating changes and ensuring people have equitable access to lifejackets, but it is a small investment for the long-term return given a single death has a life-time cost to society of \$12.5m. Ultimately, it will reduce the cost of frontline rescue. A number of organisations in the sector are also primed to help spread the word.

- “The blanket rule is not needed.” Twelve grieving whānau each year say otherwise. Having one rule that is easy to understand and communicate will save a lot of confusion and risk. It will also save cost, with multiple entities around the country currently communicating different rules and watercraft users having to figure out what rules apply when they move around the country.

Conclusion

We urge the committee to seize this once in a generation opportunity to drive a reduction in New Zealand’s drowning deaths. It’s a chance to simplify existing rules and create behavioural change that will last lifetimes.

Again, we ask the committee to:

- Recommend changes to this Bill to remove both the age (not just under the age of 15) and boat size (not just 6m or less) limitations
- Endorse the amended Bill to be returned to the House to support the creation of a culture where all watercraft users are clear that wearing lifejackets is just what we all do as New Zealanders.

About us

Water Safety NZ has been a national sector leadership organisation in Aotearoa for 76 years. You can read more about [what we do here](#).

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Appendix

LIFEJACKET REQUIREMENTS

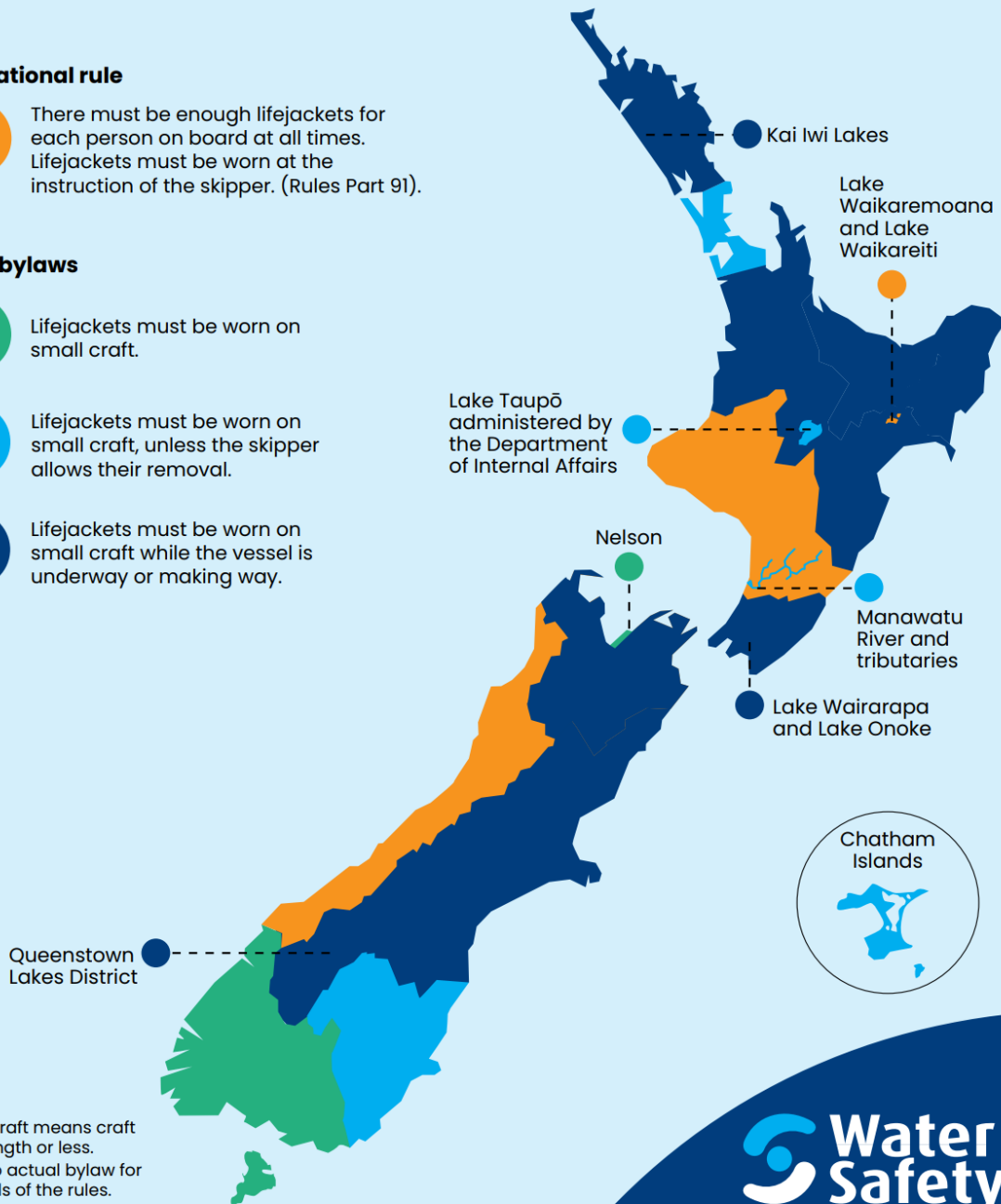
The national rule and local bylaws

The national rule

- There must be enough lifejackets for each person on board at all times. Lifejackets must be worn at the instruction of the skipper. (Rules Part 91).

Local bylaws

- Lifejackets must be worn on small craft.
- Lifejackets must be worn on small craft, unless the skipper allows their removal.
- Lifejackets must be worn on small craft while the vessel is underway or making way.



* Small craft means craft of 6m length or less.

* Refer to actual bylaw for full details of the rules.

* Example as of 4 December 2025.

Water Safety
NEW ZEALAND

ENDS