

New National Survey Reveals Impact of Access Challenges on Boaters

Findings support NMMA's Waterways Access Initiative and the need to modernize America's recreation infrastructure

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The National Marine Manufacturers Association (NMMA) today released new national survey findings from 2,000 active U.S. recreational boaters, offering a clear picture of how access challenges are shaping Americans' on the water experience. The results show that congestion at ramps and marinas, limited storage availability, and waterway maintenance issues are widespread and already impacting how often Americans boat.

According to the survey, 80 percent of boat owners experience congestion at their primary access point, and 83 percent say that congestion limits their ability to go boating at least sometimes. These pressures are affecting behavior: 71 percent of owners have

already changed their behavior because of access challenges, reporting that they boat less often, travel farther to launch, or spend less on boating overall.

“These findings underscore what we hear from boaters in every region,” said Frank Hugelmeyer, NMMA president and CEO. “When access points are congested or waterways aren’t properly maintained, families lose time on the water. This survey makes clear that addressing access challenges isn’t just about convenience. It’s about protecting participation, enjoyment, and the economic vitality of boating communities.”

Survey respondents also weighed in on the boating access improvements that would make the biggest difference. Ninety three percent say improved access would increase their boating frequency, and more than half say it would increase significantly. The most desired improvements include reduced congestion, more public ramps and marina slips, expanded storage options, and better parking. Many respondents emphasized that access also includes the condition of the waterways themselves. Sixty-six percent say waterway maintenance is extremely important to their boating experience, and 64% were affected by water levels, dredging, or debris in the past year.

“Healthy, well maintained waterways are essential infrastructure,” Hugelmeyer added. “They reduce congestion, improve safety, and allow more people to enjoy America’s rivers, lakes, and coastlines. Boaters are telling us clearly that maintenance and access go hand in hand.”

The survey also highlights how access influences future participation. Nearly half of non owners surveyed are planning to move forward with a boat purchase, and many say improved access would support that decision. More storage availability, closer ramps, and beginner friendly programs were all cited as factors that would convert interest into ownership.

While the national trends are consistent, regional differences offer important nuance. Boaters in the Pacific/Southwest and Great Lakes report the highest levels of congestion, while those in the Rocky Mountains/Plains and South Atlantic express the strongest concern about waterway maintenance. South Atlantic boaters report the highest satisfaction and shortest travel times to water.

Taken together, the findings reinforce an opportunity to strengthen recreational boating, expand participation, and support the made-in-America marine industry by improving access. The results directly support NMMA’s Waterways Access Initiative, announced in July 2026, which focuses on protecting and expanding access to public waters, modernizing recreation infrastructure, and sustaining the \$230 billion recreational boating and fishing economy.