

Massachusetts State Police and State Officials remind public to prioritize safety during holiday weekend

As Massachusetts celebrates Independence Day this weekend, state environmental and public safety officials are urging members of the public to use caution and common sense on roadways and in the water, to avoid the risks posed by illegal fireworks, and to continue practicing health and safety measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 during the July 4 holiday weekend.

Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Kathleen Theoharides on Friday joined EOPSS Undersecretary Terrence Reidy, State Fire Marshal Peter Ostroskey, Environmental Police Colonel Shaun Santos, and State Police Colonel Christopher Mason at Constitution Beach in East Boston to discuss the importance of using caution to ensure a safe and healthy holiday weekend for all Massachusetts residents.

“As we celebrate Independence Day this year under the unique and unprecedented circumstances created by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is critically important that residents throughout the Commonwealth are mindful to prioritize safety for themselves, their families, and their neighbors,” said EEA Secretary Theoharides. “In recent weeks we have seen an increase in tragic boating accidents, as well as drought conditions that increase the risk of brush fires, and we urge the public to take extra care when engaging in outdoor recreational activities to keep themselves and others safe and healthy throughout the holiday weekend.”

“The people of Massachusetts have done a remarkable job in

reducing the spread of COVID-19, but the virus isn't taking a holiday," said EOPSS Undersecretary Reidy. "We're asking that everyone observe Independence Day safely by using face coverings and maintaining social distance in public, operating boats and vehicles responsibly, and leaving fireworks to professionals."

As a result of low precipitation since May and recent above normal temperatures leading to drying conditions across the Commonwealth and steep declines in precipitation and streamflow, several regions in Massachusetts are in a Level 2 – **Significant Drought**. At Level 2 – Significant Drought, as outlined in the Massachusetts Drought Management Plan, conditions are becoming significantly dry, increasing the potential risk for brush fires.

"Massachusetts has had more than 700 **brush fires** this year, consuming hundreds of acres of land," said Fire Marshal Ostroskey. "Fire safety is a year-round priority, but in light of the significant drought conditions we're urging extra caution with grills, campfires, and smoking materials. We're also reminding the public that fireworks aren't just illegal in Massachusetts but dangerous as well. They can cause grave injury, burn down a home, or spark an outdoor fire that takes days to bring under control. Preventable fires can slow down the response to other common emergencies, so please play it safe and smart this summer."

Boaters are reminded that operating any vessel under the influence of drugs or alcohol is strictly prohibited. To help address boating under the influence (BUI), the Massachusetts Environmental Police will take part in **Operation Dry Water**, a nationwide campaign addressing BUI during the July 4 weekend. Increased numbers of recreational boaters on the water, as well as an increase in the number of injuries and deadly accidents related to boating under the influence, is common during the July 4 holiday weekend. The U.S. Coast Guard, local and state law enforcement agencies, recreational boating

safety advocates and the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) are participating to help raise awareness and prevent tragedies related to boating under the influence.

“It is important that boaters take important steps to practice safe and responsible boating, as the Commonwealth has seen a dramatic increase in tragic boating accidents this year,” said Massachusetts Environmental Police Colonel Shaun Santos. “As we anticipate significant boating traffic throughout the July 4 holiday, the Massachusetts Environmental Police will take part in Operation Dry Water and will focus on enforcing Boating Under the Influence law to increase boating safety throughout the Commonwealth.”

According to the United States Coast Guard, there were 4,168 recreational boating accidents nationally in 2019 leading to 613 deaths, 2,559 injuries and approximately \$55 million dollars of damage to property. Of the fatalities, 77% were due to drowning. Of those who drowned, 84% of the victims were not wearing a lifejacket.

Boaters are also prohibited from operating within 150 feet of public or private swimming areas. All boaters are urged to operate their vessels at reasonable speeds based upon existing conditions, including traffic density, weather, and visibility. For inland waters, operating at a speed greater than 45 mph is considered excessive.

Under Massachusetts law, boaters under the age of 12 may not operate a motorboat unless accompanied and supervised by an adult. Children under the age of 16 may not operate a personal watercraft. Children ages 12-15 must complete an approved boating safety course to operate a motorboat, children ages 16 and 17 must do so to operate a personal watercraft. All boating accidents must be reported to the Massachusetts Environmental Police at (800) 632-8075.

Parents and caregivers are also reminded to pay extra attention to young children in and around **swimming pools, lakes, and beaches** even when a lifeguard is present.

“Massachusetts State Police will be on the road to keep **motorists** safe this holiday and every day,” said Massachusetts State Police Colonel Christopher Mason. “Be sober, slow down, wear your seatbelt, and when you are the driver, pay attention to your only responsibility – driving the car. And we urge motorcyclists to be just as careful. Nothing says freedom more than the open road, so slow down and enjoy the ride.”

Officials said state beaches and other Department of Conservation and Recreation sites would be open this weekend but emphasized the need to follow public health guidance on those properties to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission and exposure.

Recently, the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) created a Find a Park webpage to provide the public with information prior to visiting a state parks property. The webpage, which has a search feature to identify state park properties within a select distance, displays pertinent details about each state park or facility, such as the availability of amenities, recreational activities offered, trail maps, and more. Importantly, the new webpage will enable visitors to shape their plans prior to exploring the state parks system’s many properties throughout the Commonwealth.