Weekend watercraft incidents renew call for riders to take required safety course

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Associated Press and Gazette Staff

The death of a 9-year-old girl shows why the state should make people take a safety course to use personal watercraft, a state boating expert said.

Amanda Backes of Machesney Park, Ill., died Sunday after she was hit by a personal watercraft Saturday on Clear Lake near Milton. Amanda was in an inner tube being pulled by a boat.

The driver of the personal watercraft, 20-year-old Joseph N. Gibson of Rockford, Ill., had a five-minute lesson before driving the Seadoo, which belonged to his boss.

Gibson panicked after he came out of a tight circle and let go of the throttle, law enforcement officials said.

Operators lose steering control when they cut back on the throttle, which John Lacenski said is a mistake that inexperienced operators often make.

Lacenski, boating law administrator for the state Department of Natural Resources, has urged state lawmakers for the past few years to require personal watercraft drivers to finish a safety course.

"I think it could solve some of our problems and could prevent accidents like the one that occurred this past weekend," he said.

In another accident over the weekend, another Illinois man operating a personal watercraft for

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the first time was hospitalized after hitting a pier and a tree on the Rock River near Newville, the Rock County Sheriff's Department reported today.

The accident rate for registered personal watercraft has dropped in the past decade but remains four times higher than the accident rate for other boats, Lacenski said.

Canada and some U.S. states already have laws that require personal watercraft operators to take safety training courses.

Wisconsin law sets the minimum age for operating a personal watercraft at 12. Anyone under age 16 must complete a boating safety course before operating a PWC, and a person must be at least 16 to rent one, Lacenski said.

PWCs are under a slow, no-wake regulation anytime they are within 100 feet of another vessel or within 200 feet of the shore, said Kathleen Wolski, regional information officer for the DNR in Milwaukee.

It's illegal to operate a PWC within in 100 feet of a boat towing a skier or engaged in similar activity, or within 100 feet of the tow rope or the skier, Wolski said.

Wisconsin's Joint Legislative Council is studying boat-safety courses as part of a larger review of motorboat, snowmobile, all-terrain vehicle and motor vehicle laws dealing with intoxicated operators. Lacenski said he is awaiting word on what the council will recommend.

However, Ron Sklansky of the Joint Legislative Council said this morning that the study, which is nearing completion, did not address personal watercraft.

A separate study is focusing on the statutes that regulate boating, but Mark Patronsky, senior staff attorney for the Joint Legislative Council, said that study committee's charge focuses more on cleaning up the 40-year-old boating regulations than initiating new regulations.

However, the decision on what to include is up to legislators on the committee, Patronsky said, and individual legislators have time in the current session to introduce any new regulations they wish.