

NMMA Certification

Benefit or Boondoggle?

BY DEAN TRAVIS CLARKE



THE NATIONAL MARINE MANUFACTURERS Association wants all its boatbuilding members to accept and use its rigorous, official certification standards to ensure safety, meet optimum construction standards and adhere to federal regulations. Not long ago, the NMMA adopted those standards from the American Boat and Yacht Council, an independent group of boatbuilding experts, engineers, lamination specialists, engine designers and the like who dictate best-practice rulings. And for the most part, many companies toe the line. But what of those that don't? Should you only consider purchasing a vessel with the NMMA Certified sticker affixed? Why weren't the previously existing U.S. Coast Guard standards good enough?

WHY BOTHER?

Heretofore, all recreational boats sold in the United States had to meet U.S. Coast Guard regulations as a bare minimum.

ABYC standards are much more comprehensive than the Coast Guard's. Rather than reinvent the wheel, so to speak, the NMMA partnered with ABYC, accepting its



more stringent protocols and promoting their industry-wide acceptance. So you can rest assured that a vessel carrying the NMMA Certified sticker has been built to meet the most exacting standards available. Your family and friends will benefit from that without even knowing it.

NMMA certification demands much more than filling out some paperwork and sending in a check. The NMMA has eight third-party inspectors (worldwide) who spend many hours at a builder's factory, surveying each model in the line to make sure each boat meets every standard. Certification is an annual process. In other words, if you build 10 boat models and have them all inspected and certified this year, you must do it all over again next year. The process can take anywhere from two weeks to several months to complete. And of course, the NMMA doesn't do this out of the goodness of its heart.

While the NMMA doesn't have a per-model charge certification, it bases how much to charge on how much time it takes an inspector to examine *all* models.

Says Robert Newsome, NMMA manager of engineering standards, "Depending on the boat type(s), an NMMA certification inspector could spend anywhere from a minimum of four hours to a maximum of 15 hours, inspecting every model a manufacturer builds. The average annual cost of \$1,500 to \$2,000 covers fees associated with the entire NMMA certification program."

According to the NMMA, of its approximately 350 boatbuilding members, 211 have completed the inspection process for all models, while 145 still await certification. Remember that they all must undergo certification on all models again next year.

The NMMA also claims that only three builders have declined to participate in the certification program, stating reasons such as certification was not necessary or they didn't want to make the necessary changes for compliance. Does that qualify those boats or builders as inferior? Certainly not. Stubborn or cost-conscious, perhaps. Though, reality dictates that they *could* be inferior quality. However, that determination would take much more research than simply seeing the NMMA Certified tag.

THE INSPECTION

The NMMA certification program covers more than 30 items, which vary by



Glacier Bay is one of many boat manufacturers in the United States that you'll find listed as certified: Check www.nmma.org/certification for the most current list.

BETTER BOATING

boat type and size. For example, some regulations affect boats 26 feet and under, while others address only vessels over 26 feet. Still others apply to all. Some of these items include: fuel systems (both diesel and gasoline), ventilation, passenger and weight capacity (on boats under 26 feet), maximum horsepower rating and level flotation (boats under 20 feet), AC and DC electrical systems, horns, nav lights, carbon-monoxide detection, steering systems, marine sanitation devices, cooking fuel systems, helm visibility,

windows, doors and hatches, bilge pumps, seat structures, exhaust systems, seacocks, through-hulls, drain plugs, ladders, handholds, railings and finally, the all important CYA — warning-label placement and guidelines.

Each manufacturer sends at least one production person to an NMMA training class. Once that person becomes NMMA sanctioned, he or she returns to the factory and oversees production based on NMMA standards.

Each time a manufacturer develops a new model, a third party hired by the NMMA comes to the plant to verify that all


production has progressed according to code and that the boat meets the requirements. Once all that has been accomplished, the builder can affix the appropriate plaques. You'll usually find them somewhere near the helm.

CATEGORIES OF VESSELS

The NMMA has categories to which specific regulations apply. These categories are outboard and non-powered boats (including canoes and sailboats), inboard, sterndrive and sea-drive boats, pontoon boats, inflatables and johnboats. Interestingly, certification neither applies to nor is required of racing boats. By the way, the NMMA also certifies boat trailers and personal-watercraft engine oils and offers special certification for vessels being sold into the European market.

THE DOWNSIDE?

If you click on the Web link below to find a comprehensive list of NMMA-certified boats, you'll notice most of the major brand names. And certainly, nobody doubts that they all build quality boats safe for taking your family out on the water. (Obviously, nobody can inspect or build to counter stupidity or a lack of common sense. You wouldn't take a 16-foot bow rider out in 8-foot seas.)

But what of all the smaller companies that aren't yet certified? Plenty of reasons exist for nonparticipation. That doesn't necessarily qualify that company's boats as inferior, unsafe or not to be considered. Suffice it to say that seeing that NMMA certification placard next to the helm saves you research time, lots of questions and not a little apprehension. 

In the opinion of Sport Fishing magazine, the benefits of NMMA certification outweigh the few shortcomings. Therefore, starting with this issue, we will note when a boat has earned NMMA certification in each profile and new-boat column.

HOW TO FIND AN NMMA-CERTIFIED BOAT OR YACHT

Ask your local dealer if the boat you want is NMMA-certified.

The name boards at the entrance to most boat-show displays boldly announce which boats carry NMMA certification. Look for the NMMA Certified logo on the capacity plate of boats under 26 feet or on the yacht plate of larger vessels. Visit www.discoverboating.com/buying/certified/boats.aspx.