The Southern States Boating Law Administrators (SSBLA) held their 44th Annual Conference and Business Meeting at the Double Tree Hotel in Little Rock, AR from April 30-May 3, 2005.

The Opening Session was called to order by SSBLA President Jerome Madrid, the New Mexico BLA, with the presentation of the colors by the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission Color Guard.

A fast paced, information rich meeting, was punctuated by several excellent presentations by members of the meeting host, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. Major Chuck Woodson discussed the AGFC’s critical role in presidential security details during the Clinton Library Ceremonies. Corporal Shad Pearce provided a presentation on the typical role played by a dive team as well as the more creative role played by the AGFC Dive Team in criminal investigation and spear fishing enforcement.

Bob Cushing, the Boating Education Coordinator presented two new boating advertisements featuring well known personality Forrest L. Wood, Chairman AGFC.

Randy Edwards, President of the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) discussed the new initiatives and changes taking place at NASBLA. He noted that the association is now 50 years old and has undergone many changes. Most recently, there has been a major turnover in BLA personnel around the country. There have been 23 new BLA’s since 2003. With such a turnover, communications is one of the most critical issues. NASBLA is working on a new strategic agenda and working executive board; establishing a Finance/Audit Committee, Governance Committee and a Resource Development Committee; they are reviewing By-Laws and updating the Mission Statement; hiring an Executive Director and a Government Affairs Director; and they are examining the board structure and ways to share the travel burden. A spring NASBLA meeting and conference is being planned for Lexington, KY.

Ed Carter, Chairman of the National Safe Boating Council and BLA from Tennessee, gave a presentation on the National Safe Boating Week, its marketing materials and related websites.
Col. Terry West, Georgia BLA presented an interesting survey conducted on Sheriffs, Judges and Prosecutors in 51 counties. Three major questions were asked and the participants asked to agree (5), be neutral (3) or disagree (1). On BUI v. DUI, the result was 4.14 indicating that on the law enforcement side, they tended to agree with the enforcement of BUI laws. On questions concerning Open Container Laws and Mandatory PFD Wear, the results were 3.32 and 3.24 respectively, indicating a more neutral, yet supportive stance.

On a Georgia Boater Survey, BUI was ranked as the #1 problem; 85% support mandatory child PFD wear; 91% agree that the boating laws are clear; and 79% wanted high visibility patrols.

These two surveys are very extensive and provided detailed reports. The above information is but a small part of the report and should not be quoted without reviewing the entire report in detail.

Captain Richard Moore, BLA from Florida, provided an interesting review of the 2005 Florida Boating Safety Awareness Campaign. The campaign is based on detailed information gathering where Florida statistics in the 2003 year were compared to other states. Florida ranked #2 (752) between CA (797) and NY (224) in accidents and #1 in fatalities (64) over CA (61) and LA (40). The trend does not appear to be getting better since preliminary stats for 2004 show 68 fatalities in FL.

A detailed review found that 60-75% of accidents and fatalities occurred in only 10 counties. Most interesting was that the problems varied from one area to another. This indicates that the message needs to be tailored. The “shotgun approach” on a national and statewide project basis is only marginally effective. Therefore, Florida will conduct a focused effort in a pilot project and then measure the end result.

The pilot project will coincide with National Safe Boating Week, target males 36+ yrs old, owning <26ft boats, living in Lee County (Ft. Meyers area). The pilot project will stress Operator awareness, life jacket wear and alcohol issues. Obviously, these demographics and issues were identified during the statistical analysis. They tended to contradict previously held positions that many of the local accidents were caused by out of state vacationers on rental boats. The follow-up measurements and results will help identify success rates and aid in development of future projects. This type of detailed analysis and targeted program provides for the most effective use of boating safety resources and could yield the best results. This will be measured in reduced accidents and lives saved.
As with all BLA meetings, the United States Coast Guard’s presence was evident. Jeff Hoedt, Chief, Office of Boating Safety, U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters provided an insight into the many changes pending at CG Headquarters. Directorates will be changing to a number system. Though exact information on changes is not available, some things are clear. Risk based decision making where the highest risk will receive resources will become the norm. Two major issues will be addressed: PFD wear and education prevents accidents. Currently, statistics show a 90% PFD wear rate among PWC operators and a 60% rate among children. Adult wear rate is less then 10%. The goal is over 40% wear rate.

Work continues on the Hull Identification Number issue and 17 character HIN. A new plan is being developed to capture the state registration information into a national database.

Good communications and reporting is critical. Reporting of accident data will be tied to budgeting reports. Retention of Recreational Boating Safety in the CG, when transferred to Homeland Security, was a plus for security and budgeting issues.

MSTC James Richardson, USCG, MSO Memphis, TN provided a presentation on America’s Waterway Watch program and a little insight into the area of operation for the Memphis MSO. Funding for America’s Airport, Highway, Railroad, Neighborhood and Waterway Watch Programs all come from the DoD. Several other localized programs have been developed, but all work in unison.

Stu Soffers, State Liaison Officer, USCG Auxiliary, provided an interesting U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary education program modeled after the Jeopardy program. Several of the BLA’s acted as “contestants” as questions concerning boating safety were fielded. I’m happy to say that the deciding factor in the scores was the “Daily Double” as all contestants answered every question correctly. The game was an example of creative thinking to keep public education classes both informative and exciting.

This was only a glimpse into an action packed conference. Anyone involved in recreational boating safety, whether on a professional level or volunteer level, can gain a wealth of knowledge by attending any of the regional or national conferences. I urge everyone to support your regional organization and attend your local conference. For future conference information, visit www.nasbla.org.