



Best Practices – Digital Certificate of Number (Digital CON)

Background:

Under [46 U.S.C. § 12301](#), all undocumented vessels equipped with any type of propulsion machinery must be issued a Certificate of Number (CON) by the designated issuing authority in the state where the vessel is primarily operated. This requirement ensures proper identification and regulation of vessels operating in state waters.

The CON serves as the vessel's registration document and is primarily used to establish proof of ownership. It contains key state registration information, which can be accessed electronically by law enforcement through state-managed vessel databases. By referencing the registration number physically displayed on the vessel, enforcement officers can efficiently retrieve details related to ownership and vessel specifications.

Additionally, [46 U.S.C. § 12304](#) mandates that the Certificate of Number must be available for inspection while the vessel is in operation. The only exception applies to vessels under 26 feet in length that are leased or rented for noncommercial purposes for a period of less than seven days. In such cases, the CON is not required to be physically present on board. These requirements form the legal foundation for states to implement CON policies that reflect both traditional and modern practices in vessel registration.

Discussion:

Effective July 5, 2024, the U.S. Coast Guard's final rule amended Certificate of Number (CON) requirements to allow vessels to carry a CON in either hard copy or digital form. This regulatory change aligns with statutory updates in Section 11506 of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2023 (*Pub. L. 117-263*), which revised 46 U.S.C. § 12304 to permit digital CONs.

This shift modernizes documentation practices, offering recreational boaters greater flexibility and convenience. Digital CONs reduce reliance on paper documents and integrate smoothly with widely used mobile platforms, aligning with how millions of users already manage official records.

As of June 2025, the Coast Guard estimates:

- Up to 3.5 million CONs may be renewed digitally each year.
- Around 50% of smartphone users are expected to adopt digital CONs, totaling about 1.7 million annually.



Best Practice:

As states increasingly shift to digital documentation, the National Association of Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) recommends that state statutes authorize and accept digital Certificates of Number (CONs) consistent with federal law under 46 U.S.C. § 12304.

For the purposes of this document, “*digital*” refers to the display of a CON on an electronic device, such as a mobile phone, tablet, or computer. Acceptable formats and examples include, but are not limited to:

- A PDF, JPEG, or similar static image file representing the CON;
- A photograph or screenshot of the CON displayed on an electronic device.

In addition to statutory updates, NASBLA recommends that states adopt safeguards to protect both vessel owners and officials when a CON is presented digitally. These protections should include:

- **Privacy Assurance:** Displaying a digital CON does not constitute consent for law enforcement officers, Coast Guard personnel, or state officials to access any other content on the device.
- **Limited Scope of Access:** Handing over a device solely to display a CON shall not be interpreted as consent to search or review any other data, applications, or functions.
- **Liability Protection:** Any official handling a personal device solely to view a digital CON shall be immune from liability for any unintentional damage to the device incurred during that interaction.

These best practices are intended to support privacy protections for the public and limit liability for officials, while promoting flexible and modernized compliance with CON carriage requirements.

States are encouraged to review existing vessel registration laws and administrative procedures to ensure consistency with this best practice.