National Association of
State Boating Law Administrators

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Best Practices for Legacy Hull Identification Numbers

Background:

A hull identification number (HIN) is a unique identifier, required per CFR Title 33 §181, to be affixed to every recreational boat manufactured after 1972. It is a critical piece of information that enables boat manufacturers, registration & titling professionals, finance & insurance companies, law enforcement, and consumers to identify a specific vessel regardless of where it is located or who owns it.

When a HIN is properly assigned and affixed to a boat, and it is recorded correctly and consistently over time, one can accurately track that boat from the time it is first put in service to the time it is scrapped, even if it has had many owners in multiple states. This, among other things, helps to reduce theft, streamlines safety recall communication, and protects the interest of owners and lenders.

Unfortunately, HINs are not always correct or properly affixed to the boat. For instance:

- Some manufacturers have assigned HINs to their boats that were invalid.
- Other HINs were not permanently affixed to the boats' hulls and have since fallen off.
- People sometimes remove HINs unintentionally when refurbishing their boat.

In all these cases, states have had to issue new state-assigned HINs.

The primary culprit is human error. With 12 alpha-numeric characters, some of which are easily confused ("O" vs. "0", "I" vs. "1", etc.), typos and transposition errors are very common. In fact, it is estimated that several hundred thousand boats have had registration documents with hull identification numbers that do not match the HIN on the boat's transom. This is one of the reasons the U.S. Coast Guard amended its Standard Numbering System (SNS) regulations which, among other things, require states to verify and, where necessary, correct the hull identification numbers.

When states discover these errors, they either issue a state-assigned HIN or correct the error in their registration / titling system. At that point, the prior HIN – be it a HIN that was replaced with a state-assigned HIN or an incorrect HIN that was corrected – becomes the "legacy HIN".

The challenge is that many states do not have a means by which to record legacy HINs in their systems, and for those who do it is often difficult to query these legacy HINs, let alone share them with other states.

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To help states more effectively record, access, and share this information, the VIRT Committee investigated several alternatives for capturing legacy HINs so changes in a boat's hull identification number can be more easily accessed and shared between states. This way a boat's history is not lost over time and distance.

Though the Best Practice described below will not include details about why and when a legacy HIN was replaced, it does provide an easy means by which to identify prior records associated with that boat, particularly those which may exist out of state.

Best Practice:

A boat's hull identification number (HIN) is a critical piece of information that enables manufacturers, state registration & titling agencies, finance & insurance companies, law enforcement, and consumers to track a boat over time and distance. Accurately recording this information offers many benefits, ranging from vessel recall communications to theft prevention. However, since HINs are sometimes assigned and/or recorded incorrectly, we need a means by which to account for instances when a previously incorrect "legacy" HIN is replaced with a corrected HIN. To do so, NASBLA is encouraging states to add a "Previous HIN" field to their active boat registration database and use this field to record the most recent legacy HIN for a given boat, if any. This way, previously recorded HINs are not permanently lost after being corrected.

To share this information between states, NASBLA is also recommending that "Previous HIN" data be included in Interstate Reports and incorporated into the U.S. Coast Guard's Vessel Identification System, so this information can be more easily accessed and shared between states.