

Personal Floatation Device Requirements for Float Tube/ Pontoon Fishermen

I frequently receive questions from fly-fishermen regarding the statutory requirements for personal floatation devices (PFD) on Arizona waters for single-person inflatable fishing platforms (float tubes and pontoons). The following is the advice that I provide based on reasonable interpretation of state statute and Arizona Game and Fish Commission Rules.

Arizona Revised Statutes (ARS) Title 5-331 states, "*All watercraft except sailboards shall carry United States coast guard approved floatation devices of the type and category prescribed by regulation of the commission. There shall be one such device in good and serviceable condition for each person on board...*" The definition of a watercraft in ARS Title 5 is "*any boat designed to be propelled by machinery, oars, paddles, or wind action..., or as may be defined by rule of the commission.*" The Arizona Game and Fish Commission further defines watercraft in Commission Rule R12-4-501 as "*a boat or other floating device of rigid or inflatable construction designed to carry people or cargo on the water that is propelled by machinery, oars, paddles, or wind action on a sail.*" From these two definitions, the determination of whether a float tube or pontoon is a "watercraft", and thus requiring the occupant to possess a PFD, is based on how the inflatable platform is propelled. In the case of a float tube where the propulsion is by human leg action augmented by fins, the definition of a "watercraft" is not met and no PFD is required for use on state waters. In the case of an inflatable pontoon where the platform is propelled by oars or paddles, the definition of a watercraft is met and a PFD would be required. The same inflatable pontoon propelled solely by leg action augmented by fins, would be the same as the float tube example and no PFD would be required.

In summary, statutory PFD requirements for float tubes and pontoons are as follows.

1. If you are propelling your float tube or pontoon solely by leg action (kicking), no PFD is required as the platform does not meet the definition of a watercraft.
2. If you are propelling your float tube or pontoon by oars, paddles, electric motor (machinery), or a sail, then a PFD would be required as the platform meets the definition of a watercraft.

The above *legal* advice notwithstanding, the Department strongly recommends PFDs as a safety precaution for all fishermen using float tubes or pontoons regardless of whether the PFD is required by law. The minor inconvenience of having a PFD on board, or better yet worn, is vastly overcome by its life-saving value in the case of an inflatable platform failure, especially in cold water.

This information only applies to state waters. Regulations for tribal waters regarding PFDs may be different. Check with the appropriate tribal authority (e.g. White Mountain Apache Tribe) if you intend to fish reservation waters.

Jim Hinkle
Law Enforcement Program Supervisor
Pinetop Region
Arizona Game and Fish Department