Recreational Craft Harm Prevention Strategy

Te Rōpū Whakatere Poti Haumaru

2026–2031

He waka kōtuia kāhore e tukutukua ngā mimira

A waka that is interlaced will not part at the bow

1. Purpose Statement

Our purpose is to enable people on recreational craft to connect to and enjoy the water safely by working collaboratively across the sector to improve safety outcomes and reduce harm.

This strategy has a simple thread that runs through every decision and every Annual Action Plan. The challenge is persistent and largely preventable harm, most often close to shore on smaller craft.

We have developed this strategy to support behaviour change for recreational craft users by promoting three coherent actions that make the difference between survival and loss of life.

- Wear a properly fitted lifejacket.
- Carry two waterproof ways to call for help.
- Check and act on the marine weather forecast.

This strategy is about better directing the use of the recreational craft sector's collective resources, matching them to barriers, aiming at the people, places and situations carrying the greatest harm.

Workstreams underpinning this strategy provide the structure that keeps effort connected. Annual Action Plans:

- set the yearly focus and owners of actions and the measures they will take
- make learning cumulative
- demonstrate where and how a sustainable difference can be made to harm prevention.

2. Collective Contribution

This strategy belongs to everyone with a role in keeping people safe on the water in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is not the work programme of a single organisation.

It is a commitment to reduce preventable harm, shared across:

- government agencies
- iwi and Māori organisations
- community groups
- the marine industry
- emergency and rescue services
- recreational craft users themselves.

Harm in the recreational craft sector is shaped by the interaction of behaviours, environments, equipment, economics and culture. No single organisation can influence all of these. Reducing harm requires a genuine collective contribution, one which includes:

- aligned effort across the system
- coordinated investment
- shared accountability
- the willingness to work with communities not yet at the table.

The Safer Boating Forum is a national network of over 30 organisations. The Forum provides a means of sharing information, coordinating effort and providing collective leadership. Maritime NZ leads the Forum through:

- analytical capability
- regulatory oversight
- behaviour change campaigns
- the community grants programme.

Harbourmasters deliver on-water compliance across the regions. Coastguard, Water Safety NZ, Surf Life Saving, iwi organisations, and dozens of community groups deliver educational programmes and bring rescue capability, local knowledge and trusted relationships. Together, these organisations represent an end-to-end system to maintain and grow recreational craft safety on New Zealand waters.

But the Forum is only one part of a wider picture. Success depends on engaging the full community including:

- whānau/family
- workplaces
- retailers
- schools
- the people on the water every weekend who set the standard for those around them.

Research shows that friends and whānau positively influence safety behaviours. For example, the person who insists everyone wears a lifejacket before the boat leaves the ramp is setting the standard for safety for their friends, family and community.

To maximise the impact and effectiveness of their work, every organisation or community group needs to:

- work in a coordinated approach to minimise duplication
- maximise impact of the existing programmes that have been shown to be effective
- be committed to altering known ways of working and rectify issues once known
- be willing to work in partnership with others and encourage others take the lead.

What We Are Committing To

Organisations and communities participating in this strategy commit to following a shared set of operating expectations. These are what collective contribution looks like in practice.

Align effort. Coordinate messaging, share resources and work toward common outcomes. Minimise duplication and competition.

Follow the evidence. Use data, research and evaluation to guide decisions and target investment where harm is greatest.

Focus on impact. Prioritise interventions with the strongest evidence of effect. Be willing to stop what is not working.

Invest for the long term. Behaviour change is generational. Short-term project cycles do not match the scale of the challenge.

Support community leadership. Where communities are better placed to lead, the sector enables and supports rather than directs.

Be accountable. Deliver on commitments. Report openly on progress. Close the loop with the communities we serve.

3. The Challenge We Are Solving

Over 1.7 million New Zealanders use recreational craft each year. Participation is roughly even by gender. For many, the moana is connection to whānau, culture, wellbeing and kai.

For Māori, it is whakapapa: spiritual, physical and communal. For Pacific, Asian and migrant communities, it is food, socialising and belonging. For many families, fishing and gathering are as much about putting food on the table as recreation.

On average, 17 people die while boating recreationally each year. These deaths are largely preventable. Human factors, not equipment failure or extreme conditions, are the largest contributor to fatal events.

80% of fatalities occur close to shore, most within 400 metres. Most victims entered the water unexpectedly, could not call for help, and were not wearing a lifejacket. Experience is strongly associated with fatality – not because experience causes harm, but because it breeds complacency and co-occurs with greater cumulative exposure to risk.

The patterns are persistent and well-documented. Men over 45 on small powerboats account for the highest number of deaths. Pacific communities have the greatest overrepresentation in fatalities by exposure hours, followed by Asian communities, followed by Māori men. Pākehā women kayaking alone are overrepresented. Inshore waters, bars and a handful of high-risk regions – Northland, Auckland, Southland – account for a disproportionate share of harm.

Evidence tells us why these patterns persist. People underestimate risk, especially in familiar locations, and confuse years of experience with genuine competence. Boating culture is shaped by high masculinity, higher tolerance for risk and ambiguity, and short-term thinking. Younger people mirror older role models and passengers rarely challenge the skipper, particularly when the skipper is family. Trips are often spontaneous and plans change on the water.

Despite sustained effort, these patterns have been hard to shift and that tells us something important. Awareness alone does not change behaviour. Isolated programmes cannot address a problem shaped by attitudes, economics, culture, equipment and environment all at once.

*Internationally, the strongest evidence for reducing recreational craft fatalities comes from mandatory lifejacket wearing requirements. Victoria, Australia's 2005 regulation reduced drowning deaths from 59 to 16 and tripled wear rates from 22% to 63%. New South Wales achieved a 55% reduction in boating drowning rates over three decades through progressive regulatory expansion. In New Zealand, 18 of 20 people who died on recreational craft in 2024 were not wearing a lifejacket.**

* Bugeja L, Cassell E, Brodie L R, Walter S, 'Effectiveness of the 2005 compulsory flotation device (PFD) wearing regulations in reducing drowning deaths among recreational boaters in Victoria, Australia', Injury Prevention 2014, 20:387-392.

4. How We Respond

Aituā/fatalities on the water never occur because of a single failure. They emerge from the interaction of people, craft and environment. An effective response must work across all three.

People need the knowledge, skills and attitudes to manage risk:

- checking and understanding the conditions
- completing trip reports
- carrying appropriate safety equipment
- understanding both the limitations of their craft and their own abilities.

Not everyone on a vessel has equal power to influence safety: skippers hold the greatest agency, adult passengers rarely challenge decisions, and children have none. The people around the water set the norms that shape what 'safe' looks like, including whānau, friends, clubs and the wider community.

This shows up in everyday trips. A quick inshore fish with mates in a small tinny. A bar crossing on a familiar day that changes fast. Kids in a dinghy at the bach, relying on the adults nearby. The patterns are ordinary. The outcomes can be fatal.

Craft and equipment need to be fit for purpose, properly maintained and appropriate for the conditions. Small powerboats and craft 6 metres and under are involved in the majority of fatalities. Inflatable boats and dinghies are consistently overrepresented. Product standards, retail guidance, affordable access to quality lifejackets and the retirement of unseaworthy vessels all contribute to a safer system.

The marine environment is powerful, changeable, and unforgiving. Tangaroa – atua of the sea – is recognised as a living, dynamic force that is both life-giving and, at times, unpredictable. Combined with the influence of Tāwhirimātea – atua of wind and weather – it means conditions can shift rapidly and without warning. The close-to-shore zone is where the risk is the most underestimated, yet it is also the most lethal. This underscores the need to clearly identify, communicate, and actively manage high-risk locations. When incidents occur, people must be able to quickly call for help, and response systems must be capable of reaching them without delay.

Three Behaviours That Save Lives

Across all three dimensions – safe people, safe craft, safe environment – the fatality data points to three important behaviours that make a real difference between survival and death:

- wearing a properly fitted lifejacket
- carrying two waterproof ways to call for help
- checking and acting on the marine weather forecast.

These are the behavioural foundations of this strategy.

Wearing correctly fitting lifejackets

In a significant proportion of fatalities, lifejackets were either not worn, were ill-fitting or degraded, or were stowed in-craft and inaccessible when needed; in fact, in incidents where a lifejacket could have assisted (excluding traumatic accidents), 54% of people who died were not wearing one, while 42% were wearing a lifejacket. This highlights the need for people to better understand:

- the role lifejackets play in survival
- how to ensure a proper fit across different styles
- how to maintain them so they remain effective
- when they should be replaced.

It also underscores the importance of improving access to good-quality, affordable lifejackets and strengthening the capability of the retail sector to provide accurate, practical advice to customers.

Carrying two waterproof communication devices

A high proportion of those who died were unable to call for help, underscoring how critical effective communication is to survival. While data on the specific devices carried in fatal incidents is limited, research indicates that only 57% of recreational craft users carry two forms of waterproof communication most or all of the time when they are on the water.

Many fatal accidents involve either a solo skipper falling overboard or everyone on board ending up in the water. This means fixed or non-worn devices – such as a mounted VHF radio or a beacon not carried on the person – are often unusable when they are needed most. In many cases, survivors had to swim to shore to seek help, or incidents went unnoticed until people were reported overdue or wreckage was discovered. Only a small number of cases involved successfully calling for help from a mobile phone while in the water, and very few described the activation of EPIRBs

or PLBs. Where beacons were activated but fatalities still occurred, this was often in severe conditions, remote locations, or situations requiring immediate rescue.

Together, these facts highlight the need for people to:

- understand the range of communication devices available
- know which are effective in different conditions
- know who to call
- critically, carry accessible, waterproof communication on their person, as without the ability to call for help, chances of survival drop significantly.

Check, understand and act on marine weather forecast

Key target groups need to be educated in ways that are culturally relevant and age-appropriate so they can:

- understand what the marine forecast means for their specific trip
- check conditions before and during their time on the water
- make informed decisions about whether to go out or not, continue, modify their plans, or return based on changing weather.

Building this capability is critical to safe behaviour, as it equips people not just with information, but with the confidence and judgement to understand the tohū/signs and act on them in real time.

Evidence shows that weather-related factors play a significant role in many fatal incidents, even when 'weather checking' is not explicitly identified as the issue. Challenging sea states and moving water contribute to a large proportion of accidents, often increasing their suddenness and reducing chances of survival.

High-risk environments such as bar crossings – where conditions are heavily influenced by wind, tide, and swell – are repeatedly identified as sites of fatalities.

Many accidents also occur without warning, or in conditions that deteriorate rapidly, pointing to gaps in awareness, interpretation, or ongoing monitoring of marine forecasts.

Together, these facts reinforce the need to strengthen understanding of marine weather and support better decision-making on the water.

Matching the Intervention to the Barrier

Different people face different barriers to safe behaviour. Some lack knowledge or skills and have a capability gap. Some face practical barriers like cost, language or equipment that does not fit, which is an opportunity gap. For others, particularly experienced users, the barrier is motivation: they have the knowledge but do not act on it. Effective harm prevention interventions need to match the barrier.

The recreational craft safety sector has a spectrum of levers available.

- Engagement and community partnerships build trust and reach the people formal systems cannot.
- Education and competency-based training can build capability and help grow genuine skill from accumulated experience.
- Marketing and communication campaigns shift social norms and reframe safety as collective responsibility.
- Community grants remove practical barriers and fund locally designed solutions.
- Enforcement and on-water compliance set and reinforce expectations.
- Product standards and infrastructure make the safe choice easier.
- Policy and regulation create the conditions for sustained change.

International evidence confirms that these levers are most effective when deployed together. Victoria's lifejacket success combined regulation with a preceding education period and community engagement. A 2024 evaluation of Maritime NZ's approach found that coordinating behaviour change campaigns with community-led grants significantly strengthened reach and credibility. The engage–educate–enforce continuum works best as an integrated system, not a menu of alternatives.

The right combination of levers for each population and location will be determined through annual action plans, guided by evidence about where the greatest impact can be achieved.

How We Organise the Work (Workstreams)

The sector has many levers available to prevent harm. Because these levers sit across many organisations and communities, they only deliver their full value when they are connected and intentionally coordinated. We need a shared way to hold the strands together, so contributions reinforce each other, effort is not duplicated, and gaps are easier to see.

For that reason, we will continue to use the workstreams established in the 2023–2025 Strategy to organise delivery under this 2026–2031 Strategy. The workstreams provide a familiar structure that the sector already uses. They help us sustain momentum, strengthen alignment across partners, and build learning over time, even as priorities shift each year based on evidence and community voice. The workstreams also support how this strategy is designed to operate. This strategy sets the long-term direction and the shared approach.

The workstreams provide the places where that activity can sit, where ownership can be clear, and where progress can be tracked consistently across years.

Action Plans

The Annual Action Plan will translate the Forum's priorities into focused, practical action. It will identify key areas of work by aligning the most effective approaches with the barriers people face, ensuring a coordinated effort that strengthens the impact of all participating organisations.

Each plan will be guided by clear prioritisation principles. Efforts will focus on populations, places, and situations with the highest levels of harm and the greatest equity gaps. Priority will be given to interventions with strong evidence of effectiveness, or a clear rationale. Work will be concentrated where partners can collaborate for maximum impact. The Action Plan will be developed quarterly, with input from the Forum, allowing for ongoing refinement and responsiveness to emerging needs and insights.

Table: Barriers and possible interventions

Priority Audiences		
Audience	**Barriers**	**Example of possible intervention**
Pākehā men 40–60	• Experienced, skilled users that are overconfident • Normalised risk, 'it won't happen to me'	Campaign that engages audience by building on existing knowledge and helps audience learn more in a mana enhancing way.
Māori men	• Possible knowledge gaps on craft limitations, re-boarding • Cost of equipment, access to training, often alone on water • Cultural drivers (kai gathering, tangihanga) and attitudes can override safety considerations	Community based in-person practical on-water training programmes delivered with culturally relevant facilitation and locations.
Pacific communities	• Less tailored support and training available • Economic pressures, equipment cost, limited culturally grounded programmes • Cultural drivers, obligations and attitudes to provide kai; overrepresented in fatality statistics	Community based in-person practical on-water training programmes delivered with culturally relevant facilitation and locations.
New migrant communities	• Unfamiliar with NZ marine and weather conditions • Language barriers, established norms, limited access to information and training • Often high motivation to learn – but disconnected from safety systems	Training courses run by community leaders in a culturally relevant way.
Young people and families	• Opportunity to build and establish early safety behaviours • Dependent on whānau access and norms • Safety norms established early persist into adulthood	Embedding water safety into the school curriculum or engaging with young people 5–18 years of age to embed the correct attitudes and behaviours.

Innovation

Innovation matters because some risks persist even when awareness is high. People are more likely to act safely when the safe choice is easier to make in real time. New tools and new delivery models can help us reach people at the point of decision, reduce barriers like cost and access, and strengthen the link between intention and action.

In this strategy, innovation means improving what already works and running a small number of well-chosen pilots where current approaches are not shifting behaviour. That includes better ways to prompt lifejacket wearing close to shore, clearer support for communication choices that work in the water, stronger weather decision-making, and partnerships with retailers, clubs, marae and community leaders where they can make safety advice more trusted and more usable.

Each year the Annual Action Agenda will describe what these pilots are, what is being tested, their target audience, and how success will be measured. Evaluation will be built in from the start so we can scale what works and stop what does not. Where innovation is community-led, we will support community design and community leadership, and we will share learning back by explaining how we used their work to the communities who make it possible.

5. Equity and Community Voice

Harm is not evenly distributed. Pacific, Asian and Māori communities are overrepresented in fatalities relative to their time on the water. Economic pressures, cultural obligations and gaps in culturally grounded support all contribute. Universal programmes applied uniformly will not close these gaps.

The 2025 wānanga with Māori, Pacific and Asian leaders confirmed what the data shows. Equity requires:

- considered investment in the communities most affected
- genuine power-sharing in governance and programme design
- culturally grounded hands-on, on-water delivery demonstrating follow-through.

These are structural aspects to enable the success of this strategy.

Developing interventions with communities – rather than for them – consistently leads to stronger and more sustained impact. Community members bring lived experience, local knowledge, and a nuanced understanding of the barriers they face which external actors often overlook. When this insight shapes the design of interventions, solutions are more relevant, practical, and responsive to real-world conditions. Co-development also improves uptake: people are far more likely to engage with and champion initiatives they have helped create. This approach shifts interventions from being perceived as imposed or compliance-driven to being trusted, locally grounded responses that reflect shared priorities.

Working in this way also builds genuine ownership and long-term capability within communities. It strengthens partnerships by creating a two-way exchange – combining technical expertise with community insight – rather than a top-down delivery model. Over time, this fosters local leadership, peer influence, and collective responsibility, all of which are critical for sustaining behaviour change beyond the life of any single programme.

From an equity perspective, co-design is particularly powerful. It creates space for underrepresented or higher-risk groups to shape solutions that work for them, addressing structural barriers such as cost, access, language, and cultural relevance. By redistributing influence and ensuring resources are directed by those closest to the issues, community-led approaches help reduce disparities and deliver more inclusive, equitable outcomes.

*New Zealand is further advanced than most comparable nations in developing culturally grounded water safety approaches. The Wai Puna model, grounded in whakapapa, mātauranga and tikanga, is a world-leading indigenous water safety framework now integrated into national strategy. Community grants fund programmes including Coastguard's Tangata Moana campaign for Pasifika communities and kaupapa Māori initiatives across the motu. Sustaining and strengthening this work is essential.**

* Phillips, C, 'Wai Puna. An indigenous Model of Māori Water Safety and Health in Aotearoa, New Zealand'. International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education 2020, 12(3), Special Issue: Diversity in Aquatics 2 Article 7.

6. How We Make Decisions

Five enduring principles guide decision-making across this strategy. They are used to frame choices, and should be considered when determining:

- how resources are allocated
- how priorities are set
- how the sector holds itself to account.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Māori voices shape the system, not just advise it. Partnership, participation and protection are structural commitments.

Kaitiakitanga. A shared responsibility to care for people and waterways across generations. Long-term investment, not short-term project cycles.

Equity. Resources go where the need is greatest. Communities carrying a disproportionate burden receive more investment and culturally grounded delivery.

Evidence-based decision making. Actions are grounded in data, research, community voice, cultural insights, storytelling and evaluation. The sector targets resources to where harm occurs and continuously improves its understanding.

Collective leadership. The sector achieves more together than any organisation could alone. Influence is used to align effort and amplify impact and includes voices of communities that experience the greatest or disproportionate levels of harm.

These principles should be considered for resource allocation, priority decision and programme investment. They should guide how the sector balances its portfolio of work. Some programmes have established reach and proven impact. Others are newer and less tested. Some populations and contexts have not been effectively reached. This strategy does both: it sustains and strengthens what is shown to work, while creating deliberate space to test new approaches where current interventions are falling short. Proven approaches receive continued investment and honest evaluation. New initiatives are designed with a clear hypothesis, defined scope and built-in evaluation. Learning from both feeds into how the sector adapts year on year.

7. How We Know It's Working

Monitoring, evaluation and learning sit at the heart of this strategy. Not simply as a reporting requirement, but as the mechanism through which the sector gets smarter over time. Every significant investment (of time, effort, or funding) should have evaluation designed in from the start.

Why This Is Hard and How We Address It

Recreational craft fatalities average 17 per year. Numbers this small do not support year-on-year statistical comparison. Weather, economic conditions and participation rates all influence outcomes independently of any intervention. A single headline target creates false precision and risks rewarding luck rather than reflecting genuine progress.

International evidence in injury prevention consistently shows that behavioural and system indicators are more reliable measures of whether a prevention strategy is gaining traction than fatality counts alone. Leading indicators detect shifts earlier and are more attributable to intervention effort. The US Coast Guard's annual observational lifejacket wear rate study, running since 1998, provides the kind of continuous behavioural data that enabled rigorous evaluation of both voluntary campaigns and mandatory regulations. Transport Canada's own evaluation identified the absence of such data as a critical gap.

This strategy monitors direction of travel and impact through four connected levels, each designed to demonstrate value differently.

Inputs and processes. Are resources being deployed as intended? Are the right organisations involved? Is the investment aligned with the communities and locations where harm is greatest?

Delivery and reach. Are we doing what we committed to and reaching the people who need it? Campaign reach, courses delivered, grants aligned to strategy priorities, on-water compliance activity, and commitments fulfilled by sector organisations.

Behaviour and attitude shift. Are the three behaviours that save lives changing? We track lifejacket wearing rates, communication device carriage, weather forecast checking, and attitudes toward close-to-shore and bar-crossing risk through longitudinal survey and on-water observation. This level will demonstrate return on investment, and will connect the sector to the activities to the observed behavioural shifts that will reduce harm.

Outcomes. Are fatalities, serious injuries and equity gaps reducing over time? We track these things using five-year rolling averages, disaggregated by ethnicity, location and craft type. These are long-term directional indicators. Attribution to any single strategy is neither possible nor appropriate, but sustained movement in the right direction, alongside strong delivery and behavioural performance, builds a credible case for the sector's collective contribution.

The question each year is not 'did we hit a number?' but 'are the indicators moving in the right direction, and can we see the sector's contribution to that movement?'

Learning as Practice

Measurement alone is not enough. The sector needs to learn from what it measures. The annual review cycle will assess what is trending well, what is static, what needs to change, and what new evidence or community insight should reshape priorities. Evaluation frameworks should incorporate Te Ao Māori approaches where appropriate, and findings should be reported back to the communities they concern. This is how relational accountability becomes real.

This strategy sets out the why and the how. It provides the principles, the evidence base, the decision-making framework and the shared approach. The what, who, when and where of delivery belong in the Annual Action Agendas that Maritime NZ co-designs with sector organisations and communities each year.

Each annual action plan will identify the populations and locations where effort will be concentrated, based on the latest harm data. It will determine the right combination of levers (for example, engagement, education, marketing, grants, enforcement, product standards, infrastructure and regulation) matched to the barriers those groups face. It will assign clear ownership and accountability across sector organisations. It will set out assumptions, risks and mitigations. It will make explicit the balance between sustaining proven approaches and testing new ones. And it will build in evaluation from the start.

The three dimensions of people, craft and environment provide ways of looking critically at every investment: is this making one or more of these safer? The annual plans are where this strategy comes to life and where the sector demonstrates its collective contribution.

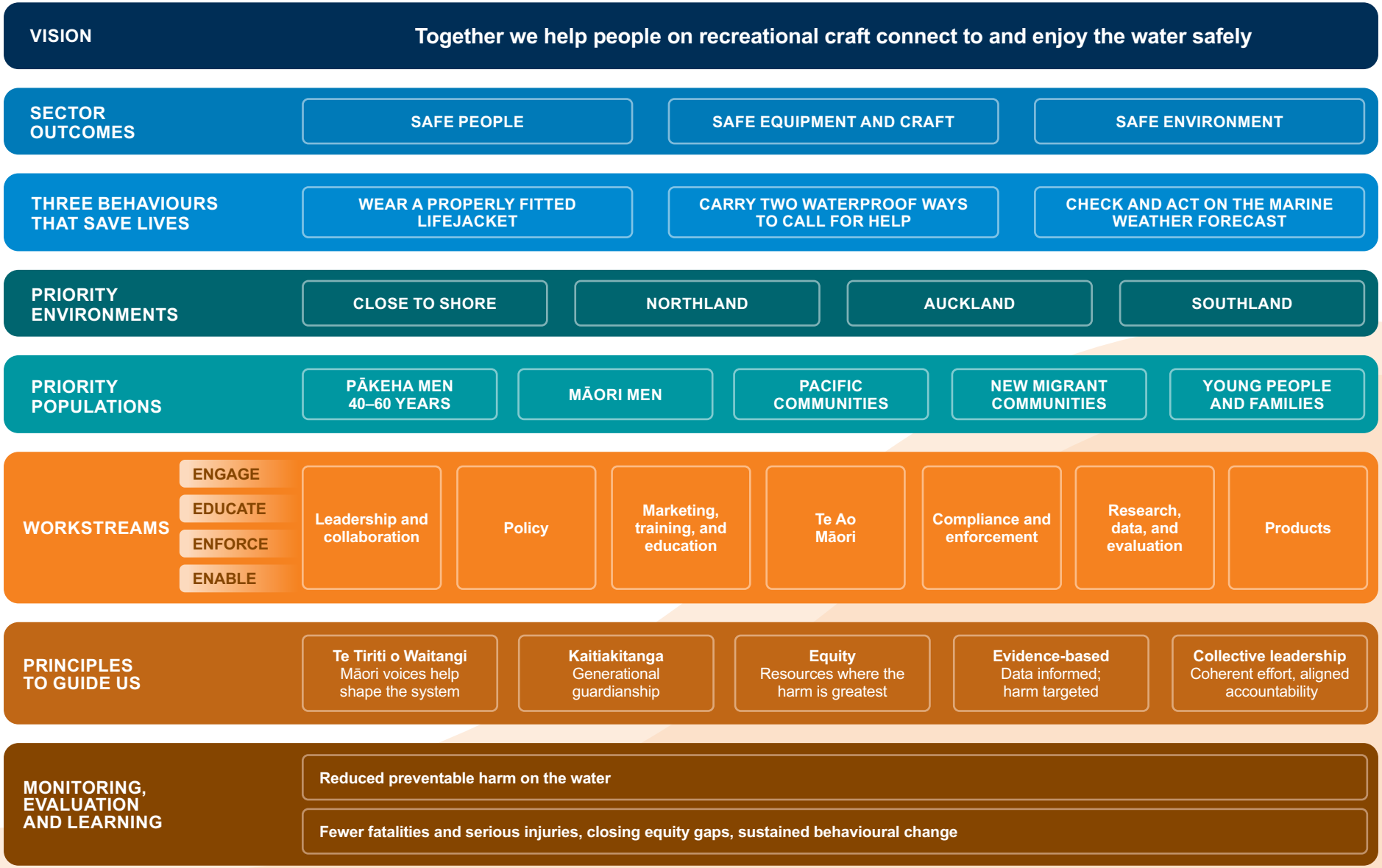
This strategy aligns with and contributes to Maritime NZ's intermediate outcome that recreational craft users understand the risks of their maritime activity and take the right actions to manage them. It aligns with Wai Ora Aotearoa's Water Safety Sector Strategy 2025. It operates within the regulatory framework of the Maritime Transport Act. It is a living document that will be reviewed at its midpoint and adapted in response to what the evidence and the communities it serves are telling us.

The commitment is to be sustained, coordinated effort over the long term, grounded in evidence, guided by principles, and honest about what is working and what is not. Progress may be uneven. Some years will be harder than others. But the sector's collective commitment is that the people of Aotearoa connect to and enjoy the water safely, and that the system supports them to do so.

Recreational craft harm prevention strategy **2026–2031**

Te Ropū Whakatere Poti Haumaru – Safer Boating Forum

He waka kōtuia kāhore e tukutukua ngā mimira – A waka that is interlaced will not part at the bow



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SAFER BOATING FORUM MEMBERS

Maritime New Zealand
Te Hau Kōmaru
Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC)
Coastguard New Zealand
Drowning Prevention Auckland
Insurance Council of NZ
Jet Boating New Zealand
Kiwi Association of Sea Kayakers
Metservice New Zealand
Navigational Safety Group
New Zealand Marine Industry Association
New Zealand Police
Search and Rescue Council
Sport Fishing Council New Zealand
Underwater Association
NZ Stand Up Paddling
Rowing New Zealand
Surf Lifesaving New Zealand
Swimming New Zealand
Te Manatu Waka
Waka Ama New Zealand
Water Safety New Zealand
Yachting New Zealand

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