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Smith: Concerns over wake-enhanced boating dominate northern Wisconsin listening sessions



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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Wisconsin residents attended state budget listening sessions organized by GOP legislators, but the main topic of discussion was the impact of wake-enhanced boating.

Wake-enhanced boating, which uses ballast tanks to create large waves for surfing and tubing, is raising concerns about shoreline erosion and damage to lakebeds.

While the boating industry advocates for voluntary compliance, residents and groups are pushing for stricter regulations, including a statewide rule requiring wake-enhanced boating to occur further from shore and in deeper water.

MANITOWISH WATERS – Turnout was high for listening sessions organized by GOP legislators and held May 5 and 6 in four northern Wisconsin communities.

"Good heavens, all these people," said John Hanson, chair of the Manitowish Waters Town Board, as he welcomed about 65 people to the May 5 meeting in his jurisdiction. Hanson said it was the highest attendance he'd ever seen at such a session.

But although the meetings were intended to collect input on the 2025-27 Wisconsin state budget, they were dominated by another issue that motivated most of the turnout: the impacts of wake-enhanced boating.

The sessions were led by State Sen. Mary Felzkowski, R-Tomahawk, and Rep. Rob Swearingen, R-Rhineland.

After Swearingen opened the Manitowish Waters event by saying he and Felzkowski felt the \$120 billion budget proposed by Gov. Tony Evers was irresponsible and turned the microphone to the audience, the topic immediately switched.

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Fred Prehn, who owns a waterfront home in Land O' Lakes, was first to speak.

He said while the budget was awfully important, the "monkey in the room" was wake-enhanced boating.

Prehn is a board member of [Lakes At Stake Wisconsin](#), a group formed in 2023 to push for tighter regulations on wake-enhanced boating.

"(We're here) to protect our lakes," Prehn said. "They are not suited for wake boats, plain and simple. They are glacial lakes and they are being hurt."

Wake-enhanced boating is a relatively new form of water recreation that involves use of a special power vessel with water-filled ballast tanks to increase displacement and create large waves for the enjoyment of surfers and tubers.

The waves, often 2 to 3 feet high, are big and strong enough for surfers to ride without a tow rope. Wake boats also typically produce greater downward prop wash than normal boat engines.

Wisconsin regulations allow wake-enhanced boating anywhere normal motorboat activity is permitted, typically 100 feet or more from shore.

Independent studies, including one completed [last year in Connecticut](#), have shown wake boats create more wave energy, propeller downwash and sediment disturbance than traditional motor boats.

The boating industry has advocated for education and voluntary compliance among wake boaters to stay in the deepest parts of lakes and avoid conflicts.

But Prehn said he has experienced the effects of wake-enhanced boating on his lake, including shoreline erosion and "scrubbing" of the lake bed 15 to 20 feet deep, eliminating bass spawning beds.

"(We're here) to show you how important this is on a bipartisan scale," Prehn said. "This is not a Democrat, this is not a Republican issue. We're not going to sit back and let that type of activity on these glacial lakes that we love so dearly in the north woods."

Felzkowski and Swearingen were authors of bills in the 2023-24 Legislative session that would have allowed wake surfing 200 feet from shore and eliminated local control; both failed to receive a hearing.

With no action on the issue by the Legislature or the Department of Natural Resources, state residents have worked with town boards to pass 48 local ordinances to prohibit or restrict wake-enhanced boating, according to Richard Phillips of the Last Wilderness Alliance. The nonprofit works on a pro bono basis with local boards to implement the ordinances.

In addition a Wakesports Reform Coalition of about 76 groups has formed. The coalition is advocating for a statewide rule to require wake-enhanced boating to take place at least 700 feet from shore, more than 500 feet from other boats or lake users, in water at least 30 feet deep and for wake boats to be fully emptied and sanitized to prevent the transport of aquatic invasive species before launching.

On the other side of the issue, the boating industry, including the Water Sports Industry Association and National Marine Manufacturers Association, has hired in-state lobbyists to represent its interests.

Among those working for the boating industry are Bill McCoshen, former chief of staff for former Gov. Tommy Thompson. The Schreiber GR Group, a Madison-

based lobbying firm, has also been hired by the boating industry.

Felzkowski said she and Swearingen were not involved in any efforts to develop a wake surfing bill in this session.

However she acknowledged the importance of wake-enhanced boating as an issue and as Senate president is organizing a May 28 meeting in Madison to bring parties to the table to try to hash out a compromise.

The meeting will include Legislators, including Swearingen, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, and Rep. Cindi Duchow, R-Delafield, as well as lobbyists for Lakes At Stake Wisconsin and the boating industry groups.

Felzkowski said the issue was among the most challenging she had experienced. She said representatives of districts with large, deep lakes, for example, aren't likely to support a restrictive law that pushes wake boats off smaller waters and concentrates them on lakes in their area.

And due to the state's uniformity clause she said it wasn't clear if different regulations could be put in place for northern and southern Wisconsin.

"We know our lakes in northern Wisconsin are one of our leading assets," Felzkowski said. "But these are the sort of things we're facing. I'm hoping we can reach a compromise that protects our lakes."

The topic of wake-enhanced boating occupied a majority of the hour session at Manitowish Waters, as well as those held later May 5 in Minocqua and May 6 in Eagle River and Rhineland.

About two dozen attendees recommended added restrictions on wake-enhanced boating while two made comments in support of the activity.

Chad Kravick of Three Lakes attended the Eagle River session and said wake surfing has become one of his family's favorite activities. He said while there are "bad

apples" in any group, he and his family are respectful of other boaters and have had no conflicts.

The ecological risks posed to lakes by wake-enhanced boating, though, must be considered, said Al Wirt, Vilas County conservationist. He pointed out lakes in northern Wisconsin were often quite different from those elsewhere as well as the potential for the wake boats to transfer aquatic invasive species in their ballast tanks.

"Protection is less expensive than fixing things," Wirt said.

Those who have already experienced damage they say is caused by wake-enhanced boating but have had no state or local relief carried their frustrations to the meetings.

Mike Strebe of Kiel drove to the Rhinelander session in a van with "Big Wakes Destroy Lakes" painted on its windows.

Strebe has lived for 37 years on 139-acre Cedar Lake in the Town of Schleswig in Manitowoc County. It has an average depth of 9 feet and wake surfing mostly takes place in a 33-acre lobe of the lake.

"It's a dirty shame what's happening to our lake," Strebe said. "When you've been in a place as long as I have, you know what's different and what is causing the changes. In our lake, it's wake boats."

Strebe said he and others in his area, including Scott Otterson of Kiel, aren't waiting around for a state law. They are working with Last Wilderness Alliance to get a local ordinance in place.

Felzkowski summarized the input over the four meetings.

"(Wake-enhanced boating) is the No. 1 topic," Felzkowski said at the Rhinelander session.

She said she would work to make sure any wake boating legislation retains the ability for local control.