



North Carolina
Coastal Federation
Working Together for a Healthy Coast

Abandoned and Derelict Vessels: Toolkit for Local Governments



nccoast.org/adv



I. Introduction

Abandoned and derelict vessels (ADV) remain a persistent issue for North Carolina's coastal communities and environments. Storms, vessel neglect and abandonment, rising maintenance costs, and the increasing number of aging boats have all contributed to vessels being left in waterways, marinas, marshes, estuarine habitats, and along shorelines. These vessels can create navigational hazards, threaten water quality, damage sensitive coastal habitats, impact tourism and waterfront economies, and become costly burdens for state agencies, local governments, and property owners.

Since Hurricane Florence in 2018, the North Carolina Coastal Federation (Federation) has partnered with N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC), N.C. Division of Coastal Management (DCM), the NOAA Marine Debris Program (NOAA), U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), and local governments to develop and implement the largest coordinated abandoned and derelict vessel removal effort in North Carolina's history. Through this work, the Federation and partners have helped remove hundreds of vessels and almost five million pounds of other large-scale marine debris from public trust waters and sensitive habitats while also supporting long-term policy discussions around prevention, response, and funding.

This toolkit is intended to help guide local governments as they address the ADV issue, navigate existing authorities and available resources, support responsible vessel removal and disposal, and explore preventative approaches that can reduce ADVs and future impacts.

II. Understanding Abandoned and Derelict Vessels

What Is an Abandoned or Derelict Vessel?

Definitions vary by jurisdiction and program, but generally ADVs are vessels that are:

- Left unattended for extended periods
- Sinking, grounded, stranded, or in danger of sinking
- Substantially damaged or dismantled
- Not in compliance with required lighting and marking
- Improperly moored or anchored in waterways or public trust areas
- Without an identifiable owner, or with an owner unwilling or unable to address the vessel

Many vessels become derelict gradually due to deferred maintenance, while others become displaced during storms. These vessels may be abandoned later because owners lack the financial resources to recover or repair them. Many areas also don't require owners to pay fines or penalties, and insurance isn't required.

Why ADVS Matter

ADVs can create significant environmental, economic, and public safety impacts, including:

Environmental Impacts

- Damage to marshes, oyster beds, submerged aquatic vegetation, and other sensitive habitats
- Fuel, oil, and hazardous material leaks
- Long-term debris accumulation from fiberglass, treated wood, plastics, and other materials
- Habitat disturbance during improper removal activities

Navigation and Public Safety Concerns

- Hazards to recreational and commercial navigation
- Risks to emergency response and access
- Public safety concerns associated with unstable or submerged vessels

Economic and Community Impacts

- Reduced waterfront aesthetics and tourism value
- Costs to local governments and property owners
- Impacts to fisheries, boating access, and waterfront recreation
- Increased cleanup costs over time as vessels deteriorate

III. Understanding Authority and Roles

Historically, it was very difficult, if not impossible, for local governments and state agencies to remove and dispose of ADVs. Beginning in 1981, the N.C. General Assembly granted certain coastal municipalities broader authority to regulate activities within their navigable waters. While this authority could be used in some cases to address abandoned vessels, it was not specific to ADVs. In 2015, the General Assembly enacted legislation authorizing all 20 coastal counties to remove qualifying ADVs using a process similar to that for junked motor vehicles. This authority was expanded in 2023 to include all incorporated cities and towns in North Carolina. Following Hurricane Florence, the General Assembly provided WRC with temporary statewide authority and funding in 2019 to investigate, remove, and dispose of ADVs. In 2026, the General Assembly made WRC's ADV authority permanent, formalized WRC's partnership with the Federation, and provided recurring funding to support statewide ADV removal and disposal efforts. Once a vessel has been identified, multiple agencies may become involved depending on ownership, location, environmental impacts, and removal needs.



SESSION LAW & STATUTES

S.L. 1981, Chapter 710,
S.B. 660

2013 G.S. 153A-132

2015 G.S. 153A-153(i)

S.L. 2019-108, S.B. 215

Session 2019 Session Law

2020-74 House Bill 308

SL 2019-224 (SB 429) -

2026 Appropriations Act

(Senate Bill 257)



Agency	When to Contact	Primary Role	Other Helpful Information
N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC)	First point of contact for suspected abandoned or derelict vessels; questions about vessel ownership, abandonment status, or removal authorization.	Leads North Carolina's ADV Program; investigates reports, maintains statewide ADV database, authorizes removal and disposal, coordinates with partners and contractors.	Email: adv@ncwildlife.org Program information: NCWRC Abandoned and Derelict Vessel Program
N.C. Division of Coastal Management (DCM)	Before undertaking a vessel removal that could affect coastal wetlands, marshes, or public trust areas, or when permitting questions arise.	Provides permitting guidance, coastal regulatory oversight, and best management practices to minimize environmental impacts during vessel removal.	Some removals may require CAMA permits depending on the location and removal methods. Resource page: DCM Abandoned and Derelict Vessel Resources
N.C. Emergency Management (NCEM)	Following major storms or federally declared disasters when communities are coordinating disaster recovery.	Coordinates state disaster recovery efforts and works with federal and local partners during large-scale response and recovery operations.	Serves as a key member of the Unified Command during federally declared disasters.
NOAA Marine Debris Program	When seeking technical guidance, research, best practices, or grant opportunities related to marine debris and ADVs.	Provides national leadership on marine debris, technical resources, research, and competitive grant funding.	Congress designated NOAA as the lead federal agency for marine debris. ADV Hub: NOAA ADV Information Hub
U.S. Coast Guard (Sector North Carolina)	If a vessel is leaking fuel or hazardous materials, poses an immediate navigation hazard, or creates an emergency situation.	Responds to pollution threats, navigation hazards, and hazardous materials associated with ADVs.	Pollution emergencies: National Response Center: 1-800-424-8802 24-Hour Operations Center: 1-833-732-8628 or SectorNorthCarolinaIMD@uscg.mil . U.S. Coast Guard Sector North Carolina

Agency	When to Contact	Primary Role	Other Helpful Information
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)	When a vessel is located within a federally maintained navigation channel or waterway.	Assists with navigation-related issues and vessel removal within federal navigation channels.	USACE's authority is based primarily on whether the vessel affects federally maintained navigation.
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)	Following a Presidentially declared disaster, when federal disaster assistance becomes available.	Provides funding and coordination for eligible emergency protective measures and public infrastructure recovery, including certain vessel removal activities.	FEMA works through Emergency Support Functions (ESF-3 and ESF-10) and coordinates with NCEM, USCG, WRC, DCM, USACE, and local governments through a Unified Command structure.

Please see Appendix A for a complete description of agency responsibilities.

Quick Tip

For most abandoned and derelict vessel situations, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission should be your first call. WRC serves as the state's lead agency for ADV management and can help determine which additional agencies need to be involved based on the vessel's location, condition, and any environmental or navigation concerns.

IV. Responding to an Abandoned or Derelict Vessel

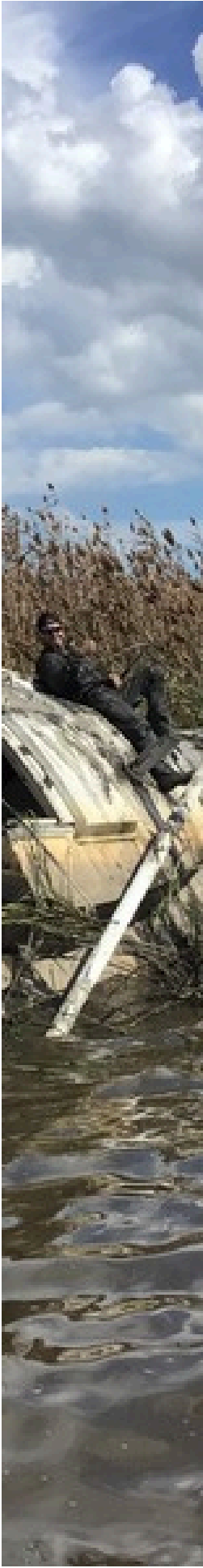
Step 1. Report the Vessel

Early reporting is one of the most important steps in addressing abandoned and derelict vessels. Prompt reporting allows the appropriate agencies to investigate ownership, determine jurisdiction, assess environmental and navigational hazards, and coordinate removal before conditions worsen.

For most ADV situations, WRC should be the first point of contact. WRC serves as North Carolina's lead agency for abandoned and derelict vessel management and can help determine which additional agencies should become involved.

Emergency Situations

If a vessel is actively leaking fuel, presents an immediate threat to navigation, or poses an imminent public safety hazard, immediately notify the U.S. Coast Guard and WRC before proceeding with routine ADV procedures.





When reporting an ADV, collect as much information as possible, including:

- Vessel location (GPS coordinates if available)
- Date and time observed
- Vessel description (size, color, type, identifying features)
- Registration or documentation numbers
- Current condition (floating, grounded, partially submerged, sunk)
- Multiple photographs showing the vessel and surrounding area
- Known ownership information
- Immediate environmental or navigational concerns (e.g., fuel sheen, leaking fluids, obstruction to navigation)
- Name and contact information of the person reporting the vessel (if applicable)

Encourage local staff, law enforcement, marina operators, harbor masters, and the public to report potential ADVs as early as possible before vessels further deteriorate.

Step 2. Determine Jurisdiction

Not every abandoned vessel falls under the same jurisdiction. Responsibility depends on where the vessel is located, ownership of the underlying property, navigability of the waterway, environmental impacts, and whether federal interests are involved.

Local Government Authority

North Carolina law provides limited but important authority for local governments to regulate and remove abandoned and derelict vessels within their jurisdictions. Depending on the vessel's

location and applicable local ordinances, counties and municipalities may investigate qualifying ADVs, notify owners, remove vessels under their authority, recover eligible costs, and coordinate with WRC and other agencies throughout the process. A growing number of North Carolina coastal communities have adopted local ADV ordinances to supplement state authorities and establish local procedures for investigation, enforcement, and removal. As of 2026, these include:

Documentation Tip

Photograph the vessel from multiple angles before any work begins. Record the location, date observed, registration numbers, and any evidence of pollution or habitat impacts. Good documentation supports ownership investigations, permitting, reimbursement, and cost recovery.

**Brunswick County | Carteret County | Currituck County | Dare County | Hyde County | New Hanover County
Pender County | Town of Beaufort | Town of Carolina Beach | City of Jacksonville | Town of Manteo
Town of Surf City | Town of Wrightsville Beach**

Step 3. Determine Ownership

Whenever possible, ownership should be determined before removal activities begin. “Determining ownership is essential because owners may voluntarily remove the vessel, may be responsible for removal costs, or must receive required notifications before enforcement actions can proceed.”

Potential sources include:

- Vessel registration numbers
- U.S. Coast Guard documentation
- Marina records
- Property owner information
- Interviews with neighboring property owners or marina operators
- Previous enforcement records

Once ownership is identified, local governments should follow applicable notification procedures established under state law or local ordinance before pursuing removal. Proper documentation throughout the investigation and removal process can support future cost recovery efforts when authorized.

If ownership cannot be determined, WRC can assist with additional investigation.

Step 4. Assess the Vessel

Before planning removal, evaluate the vessel's condition and any risks it presents.

Questions to consider include:

Navigation and Public Safety

- Does the vessel obstruct navigation?
- Is it creating hazards for recreational or commercial boating?
- Does it present risks to emergency responders?

Environmental Concerns

- Is fuel, oil, or hazardous material present?
- Is the vessel leaking pollutants?
- Is it located within marshes, oyster habitat, SAV, or other sensitive resources?

Structural Condition

- Is it floating, grounded, partially submerged, or sunk?
- Is it stable enough to tow?
- Is it likely to break apart during removal?

Accessibility

- Can equipment safely access the vessel?
- Is removal possible from existing roads, waterways, or boat ramps?
- Will temporary access be needed?

Early assessment helps determine the safest, most cost-effective removal approach



V. Planning and Conducting Removal

Step 1. Coordinate Early

Successful removals rely on early coordination among agencies, contractors, and property owners.

Before removal activities begin, coordinate with:

- North Carolina Coastal Federation
- N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission
- N.C. Division of Coastal Management
- U.S. Coast Guard
- Property owners
- N.C. Office of State Archaeology / Division of Historical Resources (when appropriate)
- Qualified marine contractors

Early coordination helps avoid duplicated efforts, identify funding opportunities, and minimize project delays.

Step 2. Evaluate Removal Options

No single removal method works for every vessel.

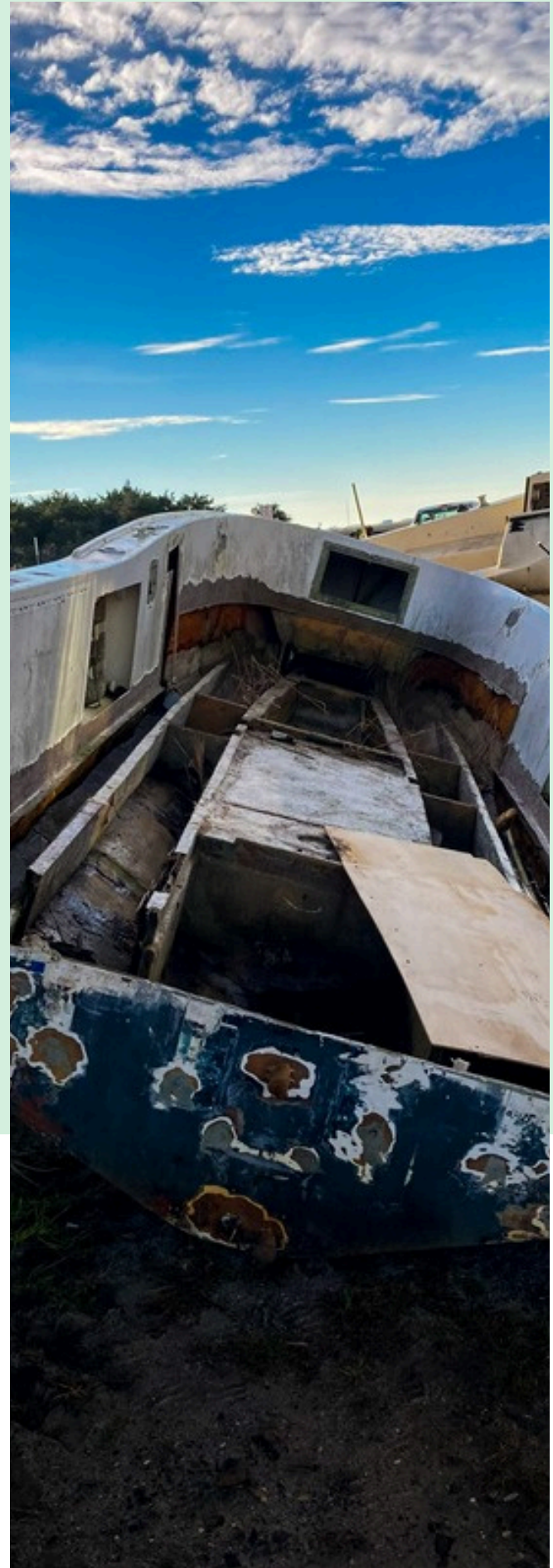
Factors influencing removal methods include:

- Vessel size
- Construction materials
- Degree of deterioration
- Water depth
- Site accessibility
- Habitat sensitivity
- Available equipment

Possible removal techniques include:

- Towing
- Crane removal
- Excavator removal
- Barge-assisted removal
- In-place dismantling
- Floating and refloating operations

The selected approach should minimize environmental impacts while maintaining worker safety.



Step 3. Determine Regulatory Requirements

Depending on the project, removal may require:

- CAMA authorization
- Federal environmental review (projects receiving federal funding may require NEPA Environmental Compliance Review, which can take several months)
- Coordination with submerged lands managers and adjacent riparian property owners, including property owner authorization where required
- Review by the N.C. Office of State Archaeology / Division of Historical Resources, particularly when a vessel has remained in place for many years or is located near known cultural resources
- Other applicable permits or approvals

Early consultation with DCM and other agencies can help identify applicable requirements before work begins and avoid unnecessary project delays.

Step 4. Select a Qualified Contractor

Many local, regional, and national marine contractors provide vessel salvage, removal, and disposal services.

The Federation maintains a continually updated resource list of contractors, companies, and marine salvage operators the Federation, WRC and local governments have worked with during marine debris and ADV removal efforts at nccoast.org/adv. This list is provided as a resource only and does not constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Federation.





When evaluating contractors, you may want to consider:

Experience and Qualifications

- What experience do you have with ADV removal?
- Have you worked in marshes or environmentally sensitive areas?
- Are you familiar with DCM best management practices and permitting considerations?
- Are you a NC licensed contractor; HAZWOPER, commercial diving and heavy equipment operation certified; and adequately insured?

Equipment and Methods

- What equipment will be used?
- How will habitat impacts be minimized?
- Can you access remote or shallow-water locations?
- How will debris and hazardous materials be contained and disposed of?
- How and where will the vessel be hauled out, dismantled, recycled and disposed of?

Safety and Compliance

- What safety procedures are in place?
- How are fuel or pollution risks addressed?
- Have you worked with state or federal agencies before?
- Can you provide references?

Project Management

- What is the cost per linear foot, and is there savings if ADVs are grouped together in bid packages?
- What is the expected timeline?
- How will weather delays be handled?
- What are the disposal plans for vessel materials?
- What documentation will be provided before and after removal?

Before selecting a contractor, verify:

- ADV removal experience • Marsh restoration experience
- Commercial diving capability (if needed) • Heavy equipment availability
- Insurance • References • Disposal plan • Familiarity with BMPs • Safety plan
- Timeline • Cost estimate • Ability to bundle multiple vessels

Step 5. Conduct Removal

Removal activities should follow applicable best management practices to protect sensitive habitats.

Recommended practices include:

- Accessing sites from existing waterways whenever possible
- Using low-ground-pressure equipment in marshes
- Scheduling work around tides when appropriate
- Minimizing dredging or excavation
- Containing fuels and hazardous materials
- Preventing additional debris generation

Step 6. Disposal and Site Restoration

Removal is not complete until the vessel has been properly dismantled, disposed of, and the site restored.

Consider:

- Recycling opportunities
- Hazardous material disposal
- Approved landfill disposal
- Debris removal
- Marsh restoration
- Restoration of disturbed elevations and contours
- Post-project documentation

Site restoration should include removing all vessel debris, equipment, and temporary construction materials, restoring disturbed marsh elevations and contours where appropriate, and ensuring the site is left in a stable condition that minimizes future environmental impacts.



VI. Funding and Assistance

One of the greatest challenges facing local governments is securing funding for vessel removal.

Removal costs vary depending on:

- Vessel size
- Accessibility
- Environmental sensitivity
- Disposal needs
- Hazardous materials
- Emergency conditions

Potential funding sources include:

- State appropriations through WRC and the North Carolina Coastal Federation
- NOAA Marine Debris Program
- FEMA disaster assistance (when applicable)
- Local government appropriations
- Cost-sharing partnerships
- Private foundations

The Federation is happy to help local governments identify potential funding opportunities and partnerships where possible.



VII. Building a Local ADV Program

Communities interested in taking a proactive approach should consider developing a local ADV program.

Existing Local Programs

A number of North Carolina coastal counties and municipalities have adopted local abandoned and derelict vessel ordinances to supplement state authorities. These communities provide valuable examples, lessons learned, and ordinance language for jurisdictions interested in establishing their own ADV program.

Successful programs often include:

- Local ordinances
- Reporting procedures
- Coordination with WRC
- Relationships with contractors
- Public education
- Storm response planning
- Funding strategies
- Marina partnerships
- Data tracking

Brunswick County and Carolina Beach are two excellent examples of ordinances to consider.

Please see *Appendix B* and *Appendix C* for the full text of each ordinance.

Developing an ADV Ordinance

Local governments interested in adopting an ADV ordinance should work closely with legal counsel, law enforcement, public works staff, and agency partners to evaluate available authorities, local capacity, and enforcement needs.

Elements to consider include:

- Existing statutory authorities
- Definitions of abandoned and derelict vessels
- Owner investigation and notification procedures
- Enforcement authority and penalties
- Removal authority
- Cost recovery provisions
- Jurisdictional boundaries
- Liability considerations
- Internal capacity for vessel removal and disposal
- Emergency powers
- Coordination and information sharing with WRC, DCM, USCG, and neighboring jurisdictions
- Mooring and anchoring management
- Time limits for unattended vessels
- Unsafe vessel provisions
- Storm preparedness requirements
- Emergency removal procedures

Program Management

Whether or not a community adopts its own ordinance, local governments can play an important role in preventing and addressing abandoned and derelict vessels by:

- Tracking and reporting ADVs within their jurisdiction and sharing information with WRC and neighboring jurisdictions
- Coordinating with WRC, DCM, and USCG once a vessel is under investigation
- Identifying priority vessels and environmentally sensitive sites
- Developing ADV response procedures before storms
- Maintaining relationships with marina operators to identify vessels that may become abandoned
- Building relationships with qualified marine contractors
- Identifying locations where vessels can be temporarily staged, dismantled, or disposed of
- Considering local mooring management strategies
- Educating vessel owners about maintenance responsibilities and storm preparedness



**Before developing an ADV ordinance
consider whether your community has:**

- **Support from elected officials • Law enforcement capacity • Public works staff available**
 - **Relationships with marine contractors • Disposal options identified**
- **Legal review completed • Budget for removals • Procedures for documenting violations**
 - **Coordination with WRC • A communications plan**

VIII. Prevention and Public Engagement

Preventing vessels from becoming abandoned is considerably less expensive than removing them after the fact. Local governments can reduce future ADV problems through proactive planning and outreach.

Voluntary Vessel Turn-In Programs (VTIPs)

Voluntary vessel turn-in programs provide vessel owners with opportunities to surrender aging or unwanted vessels before they become derelict.

These programs have been successful in other states and can reduce future removal costs and environmental impacts



Potential components include:

- Eligibility requirements
- Disposal partnerships
- Public outreach
- Temporary funding assistance

Mooring Management Programs

Mooring fields and managed anchorage areas can reduce the likelihood of vessels becoming abandoned or breaking loose during storms. Potential local actions include:

- Installing public mooring balls
- Establishing mooring standards
- Requiring maintenance or inspections
- Creating storm preparedness requirements

Storm Preparedness and Outreach

Local governments can help reduce storm-related vessel displacement through:

- Hurricane preparedness education
- Encouraging vessel evacuation plans
- Pre-storm marina coordination
- Emergency contact registration systems
- Outreach to absentee vessel owners

Registration and Tracking Improvements

Improved vessel registration, ownership tracking, and data sharing can support earlier intervention before vessels become derelict.

Partnerships with Marinas and Waterfront Communities

Marinas, boating organizations, harbor managers, and waterfront associations can help identify at-risk vessels and support preventative outreach.

Public Education

- Effective communication helps residents understand:
- How to report ADVs
- Vessel owner responsibilities
- Local ordinances
- Storm preparedness
- Environmental impacts
- Available resources

The Federation provides sample outreach materials, graphics, videos, and social media content at

nccoast.org/adv.

Learning from Local Experience

The following conversations with local government staff, law enforcement, harbor masters, and marine contractors highlight real-world experiences managing abandoned and derelict vessels. These examples provide practical insight into common challenges, successful approaches, and lessons learned that can help other communities develop or strengthen their own ADV programs.

Sgt. Robert Sullivan, Brunswick County Sheriff's Office

What are some of the biggest challenges with enforcing local ordinances?



"I'm pretty happy with the ordinance. What we have in Brunswick County is a 10-day mooring policy: you can tie up anywhere in the waters as long as it's not in the navigable waters for 10 days. After that 10 days, you either have to go to a dock and pay, or you have to leave the county for 20 days, so it's 10 days in a 30-day period and once you hit day 11, we're on you and sometimes people have mechanical issues and we'll work with you but if you try not to work with us then we'll try to get it out and get it removed."

Jarrett Anderson, Carolina Beach Harbor Master

What challenges arise when balancing enforcement, public access, and relationships with the boating community?



"There is absolutely a balance with town policy and providing a safe harbor there are people who come that need a brief provision or they are coming to us because they need to repair their vessel and they need to stay awhile or they are running from a storm and they need safe harbor so there's a balancing act, that's why we're out on the water daily, communicating with people, you're informing them and educating them on the policies and this is what you'll be held accountable to, and we have a ton of resources we hand out to people, but there is a balancing act of not letting vessels that are dragging anchor or that are being dumped and we have to protect the public trust waterway."

Richard Coley, Mainstream Commercial Divers

From your perspective, what preventative strategies could help reduce future ADV issues?



"As far as preventive strategies are concerned, storms are big thing, hurricanes or other large weather events have vessels break loose from moorings or in these marinas that aren't in great shape, so making sure there are safe places to tie off, that there is a plan in the local community for where these vessels are going and not just tying 6 or 7 ropes and hoping, or if vessels need to leave, that local communities get involved in facilitating that."

Additional Resources

North Carolina Resources

- [North Carolina Coastal Federation Case Study](#)
- [North Carolina Coastal Federation Marine Debris Program](#)
- [N.C. Division of Coastal Management ADV Resources](#)
- [N.C. DEQ Guidance and Best Practices for Removing Vessels from Environmentally Sensitive Coastal Waters and Shorelines](#)
- [N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission ADV Program](#)

Other States & National Resources

- [NOAA Marine Debris Program ADV Information Hub](#)
- [NOAA Marine Debris Program](#)
- [South Carolina Department of Environmental Services Vessel Turn-In Program \(VTIP\)](#)
- [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Vessel Turn-In Program \(VTIP\)](#)

Acknowledgements

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We especially recognize the collaborative work of:

- N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission
- N.C. Division of Coastal Management
- NOAA Marine Debris Program
- U.S. Coast Guard
- Local governments and emergency managers
- Coastal contractors and marine salvage operators
- Community partners and waterfront stakeholders

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Together, we can continue working toward cleaner, safer, and more resilient coastal waterways.