

Is Your Boat Ready to Fish? Preseason Maintenance Tips

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That trusty vessel that served so reliably all last season may have acquired some peculiarities over the winter. Whether it's the bitter winter winds of Bristol Bay or the damp air at Fishermen's Terminal, winter and inactivity are hard on a boat and its systems. You can avoid a lot of problems through proper winterization; but some gremlins seem to slip in anyway, and may go undetected until a critical time unless you do a careful recommissioning.

Of course you have changed oil in the engine and reduction gear, along with oil and fuel filters. You have checked, tightened, or replaced v-belts. You have replaced all the zinc plugs (there may be as many as eight) in the cooling system. You have opened the raw-water pumps, if you have them, to check for damaged impeller vanes. You've examined the exhaust connections for signs of cracking or leaking (black smudges if dry exhaust, drips if wet). You've checked the packing and adjusted the stuffing box. You've applied a coat of bottom paint, and replaced the hull and shaft zincs.

Good start.

Next, check the engine mounts for tightness, plus all the fuel system and hydraulic fittings. And check the air filter on the main; a dirty filter can seriously cut a diesel's efficiency. Some types can be cleaned; others must be replaced.

Check the level in the hydraulic fluid reservoir. If it's down, trace the whole system to figure out where it's leaking. Examine hydraulic hoses for weak spots, and all hydraulic fittings for corrosion and tightness.

Check the steering gear for play, and the rudder stock stuffing box for leakage. While you're down in the lazarette, locate the bonding strap and check the connections for corrosion. You may need to use a volt-ohm meter to check for continuity to ensure that the bonding system is doing its job.

While the boat is hauled out for bottom painting, be sure the prop shaft nuts are

snug, and examine the wheel. Dings from rocks and debris can cause vibration and damage to the shaft and transmission bearings; jagged edges on the blades can signal cavitation or galvanic corrosion. Try tugging on the shaft from the side to detect any play, and look for scoring on the shaft where it enters the stern bearing. Either one can indicate a need to replace the bearing.

Winter dampness is hard on electrical systems. You probably don't have time to visually inspect every connector in your electrical system, but you can flip all the switches to ensure that each circuit is functioning correctly. If you find any circuit that either trips breakers (or blows fuses) or does not work correctly, it's time to get out the volt-ohm meter again and start testing for a short or corroded connection.

Disuse is hard on batteries, especially when stored in the cold, damp bowels of a boat sitting out a long winter. To ensure that yours don't let you down, first check their state of charge with a hydrometer, and bring them up to full charge if they are not already there. Then use a load tester to determine whether they are only surface-charged or actually contain their full rated capacity of accessible power. Remove the terminal connectors (with a special tool for this purpose, not by banging them loose with a hammer) and check them for signs of corrosion. Clean the terminal posts and coat them with a corrosion preventative, then put them back on and snug them down. Be sure to keep distilled water on hand and replenish their vital fluids as they gas from charging.

Most electronics are not meant to be fiddled with. About all you can do is unplug connectors from the back of each unit and check for corrosion, spritz them with moisture-displacing spray lubricant, then put them back in place and hope for the best. You can check the rudder feedback arm for the autopilot. It's a little metal rod that attaches at the top of the rudder post to tell

the pilot the rudder angle, and the little plastic ball joints can pop out of their sockets. Make sure it is secure but free to move back and forth in place.

Once you've gone over the main mechanical and electrical systems on your boat, be sure to give some thought to safety equipment. Your EPIRB (406 MHz type) must be registered, of course, and the registrations good for three years. And what about the battery? It has a legal service life of five years, and the expiration date should be on a label somewhere on the unit. Also, newer units have a test mode, which you can trigger yourself. You should do this periodically. The self-test won't guarantee that the unit is transmitting on frequency but at least it lets you know the internal circuitry is O.K.

If you have a life raft, and it has a hydrostatic release for automatic deployment, be sure to check the release.

Read the gauges and date tags on all fire extinguishers, and recharge or replace any that are out of date or below pressure. Be sure holders release easily. If you have dry-powder extinguishers, turn them upside down and shake to be sure that the powder hasn't become compacted.

Don't forget your PFDs. Pull them out of their packs, check them for dampness and signs of mildew, test them for leaks (preferably by pulling them on and going into the water), and lubricate the zipper with silicone wetsuit zipper lubricant. And check the light and its battery, which also has an expiration date.

In a convenient location, keep the owner's manuals for all the items on your boat—from the main engine right down to the breadmaker—and use them. It's easy to overlook some important detail on a machine you may not have used for the last 10 months.

Your boat probably has other systems to service. Make a list, and check off each item as you do it. Better yet, keep a maintenance log in your vessel's logbook. ♦