

Focus on: Mooring Buoys

Purpose

Mooring buoys are typically exempt from the requirement to obtain a shoreline substantial development permit, but local review and authorization is still critical to managing our shorelines. This document is designed to clarify local government's role in authorizing mooring buoys under [Shoreline Master Programs](#) (SMPs).

Overview

Mooring buoys are overwater structures that include an anchor, anchor line, and surface float. [Washington laws establish two categories](#) for mooring buoys: those used for commercial purposes and those used for private recreational purposes. Commercial buoys are typically used to temporarily moor a commercial vessel awaiting tide changes, or loading or offloading materials. Recreational buoys are used as semi-permanent moorage for recreational vessels.

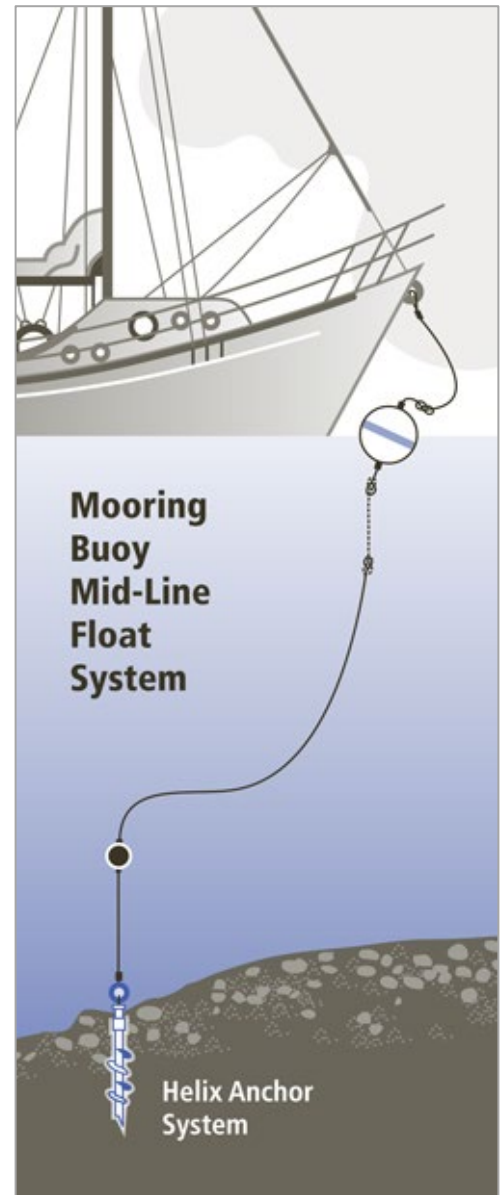
Mooring buoys are commonly proposed within areas with critical habitat, and new applications for mooring buoys may require an aquatic vegetation survey unless there is current information about the presence or absence of aquatic vegetation at a site. The state Department of Fish and Wildlife considers data to be current when it is collected no more than two years prior to application submittal.

When appropriately located and designed, mooring buoys result in fewer ecological impacts than piers and docks. However, when unregulated, mooring buoys can harm underwater habitat and obstruct navigation. Proper mooring system design and site-specific data on habitat conditions are needed to minimize impacts to shoreline ecological functions and protect critical areas. [All mooring buoy proposals must be reviewed](#) for SMP consistency whether a shoreline permit is required or not.

The preferred buoy system uses a mid-line float and an embedded anchor. The mid-line float prevents the anchor line from dragging on the bottom and scouring the benthic environment. Site conditions will not always allow for an embedded anchor, and the state Department of Natural Resources reviews each application on a case-by-case basis and may authorize an alternative system.

Local, state, and federal permits and authorizations

In Washington, mooring buoy installation requires the authorization and approval by local government, the state departments of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and Natural Resources (DNR), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.



Mooring buoy mid-line float system (Credit: Washington State Department of Natural Resources)

Local SMP review and authorization

Individual SMPs regulate mooring buoys and might address their number, spacing, distance from shore, system design, and ecological siting considerations. SMPs identify where mooring buoys are allowed and may also identify where mooring buoys are prohibited or a shoreline conditional use permit is needed. Many SMPs regulate how many moorage structures can be associated with a single property. State and federal reviews will not check SMP regulations to ensure consistency unless the proposal requires a shoreline conditional use permit or variance. Only local governments complete this task.

If the fair market value of a recreational buoy does not exceed the cost threshold for [substantial development](#), the local government may review and authorize the project outside the SDP process. However, [local governments also maintain the authority to require a substantial development permit](#) (SDP) when a proposal will impact navigation or interfere with the normal public use of the water or shorelines. A shoreline variance is required whenever a project cannot meet the specific dimensional or performance standards set by an SMP.

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife approval

Mooring buoy installations require a Hydraulic Project Approval (HPA) from the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) who will ensure construction is done in a manner that protects fish and aquatic habitats. DFW also reviews mooring buoy installation for compliance with design standards for both marine waters and freshwater areas.

Washington Department of Natural Resources authorization

Mooring buoys are commonly located on state-owned aquatic lands. The state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) does not issue permits for mooring buoys. Instead, they issue use authorizations in the forms of a license for private recreational use) or a lease for commercial use. DNR has two forms of authorizations for recreational mooring buoys: a registration for those who qualify for a no-fee mooring buoy and a fee-based license for all others. DNR will issue a license or lease after all required permits have been obtained.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers approval

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is responsible for permitting activities in U.S. waters including wetlands, streams, lakes, and marine waters. Prior to construction, applicants must notify the Corps of their intention to install a mooring buoy. In Washington, this is done by completing the [Joint Aquatic Resources Permit Application](#) . Most mooring buoys will qualify for authorization under a Nationwide Permit establishing regionally specific conditions an applicant must meet.



Find regional shoreline contacts:

<https://ecology.wa.gov/shoreline-management-contacts>



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