

From doing pumpouts to building the boats

Florida man's company now makes four models of task-specific sewage collection vessels

By Chuck King

In the mid-1990s Capt. Donnic Brown noticed more and more boaters dumping their raw sewage into the Destin, Fla., harbor. When this practice threatened his snorkeling business, his resentment really hit the fan.

"The water would have that stench smell, and our Destin Harbor was getting nastier and nastier with all the peo-

ple on the water," Brown said.

Florida's Gulf Coast population explosion had brought thousands of new boats to Destin Harbor. Many of the new boaters weren't obeying the laws, requiring boats to be at least 12 miles offshore before they could dump waste.

Brown would cruise around the harbor and notice boats at anchor, under-terred by laws, with their septic valves open, leaking sewage. He concluded

most boat owners were simply lazy, so he created an easier way for them to properly empty their tanks.

Brown built his first pumpout boat, essentially a boat with a large self-contained sewage tank, in 1996. He figured if he motored up to another boat and offered to empty its sewage into his tanks, he would be making things so convenient the boat owner couldn't turn him down. He was partially correct.

Brown charged a nominal fee for the service, causing many boaters to balk. So Brown decided to work for tips only; a strategy that ultimately turned into a lucrative business.

Within three years, he was pumping 6,000 gallons a week.

"When I quit charging I started doing more pumps and started making more money, which is the damndest thing I've ever seen," Brown said.

Now he builds them

Brown's vision evolved into PumpOut USA, a company based in Florida's panhandle that builds pumpout boats. PumpOut USA now sells four models, ranging from 18 feet to 27 feet, with capacities ranging from 200 to 1,000 gallons.

"I was trying to clean up our Destin Harbor and everybody saw what I was doing and wanted one," Brown said of his boats, which retail for between \$35,000 and \$89,000.

Unlike other pumpout boats that are retrofits of existing commercial boats, Brown says PumpOut USA boats are manufactured solely to serve as pumpout vessels.

"Pumpout boats are very convenient because the bigger boat doesn't have to come into the marina and maneuver around to empty [its] waste."

— Brenda Leonard, manager of the Clean Marina Program



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Bodas. "It was kind of a nightmare. The new boat has been wonderful for us. I wish we [had] bought it sooner."

While most modern marinas offer sewage pumps, it is often difficult to maneuver larger boats to the pumping station. Bringing the pump boat to the moored yachts strengthens the environmental consciousness and makes it more convenient for the yacht owner.

The entire pumpout process takes 10 to 12 minutes. The pumper pulls alongside its customer and attaches a hose to the sewage valve. The pump boat can draw 35 gallons of sewage per minute out of a target boat.

When the pumpout boat is finished

making its rounds, it attaches to the main sewage line and empties its tank into the city's disposal system.

"My number one rule — don't get it on you," said Brown, who says he's never spilled or leaked sewage into the water during a transfer.

Federal funding

Pumpout boats got a huge boost in popularity when environmental agencies began helping marinas pay for the vessels.

Under provisions of the National Clean Vessel Act, marinas can be reimbursed up to 75 percent of the cost of the boat. The federal contribution is de-

termined by the environmental needs of the area the marina serves, not the financial needs of a particular marina.

"They are catching on," said Brenda Leonard, manager of the Clean Marina Program and the Clean Vessel Act Program in Florida. "Do they work? Yes. They worked very well. The pumpout boats have put a new edge to the National Clean Vessel Program."

Along with PumpOutUSA boats, pumpout boats manufactured by Marine Boat Builders, Bay Sales Marine and Gowen Marine also qualify for Clean Vessel Act reimbursement.

"Pumpout boats are very convenient because the bigger boat doesn't have to

come into the marina and maneuver around to empty [its] waste," Leonard said. "If they are already in getting gas, they can be pumped out, too."

Brown says Destin's waters are immeasurably cleaner now that boaters are using the pump boat service. And he's busier than ever.

Brown sold his bustling snorkeling boat service a few years ago to concentrate his efforts on PumpOut USA.

"It's been a great sport and people are just now realizing how important it is to keep our waters clean," Brown said. "I've had people tell me they didn't want one. Now, a few years later, they tell me they can't believe they didn't have one."

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