

Bilge Pumps: The Rodney Dangerfield of Marine Gear

When boat owners muster the nerve to reach in the questionable waters of the bilge, it's typically not to maintain their bilge pumps, but to find out why they're not working. Although they rarely get the respect they deserve, bilge pumps (like anything else onboard) require regular maintenance to keep them running smoothly. Here is some guidance for establishing a good bilge-pump maintenance routine:

≈ Start with the bilge itself. No pump can overcome a bilge choked with trash, so a good old-fashioned cleaning is the first order of business. Even the bilge of a brand-new boat can be littered with wood shavings, bits of fiberglass, and globs of adhesive. Oil in the bilge combines with dirt to form a sludge that can clog pumps and stymie float switches.

≈ Larger back-up pumps and their associated float switches should be mounted higher than the primary pump. This lets the smallest pump take care of normal seepage (with less battery drain) and leaves the larger ones to kick in when needed. Make sure all pumps, float switches, and strainers are easily accessible for easier maintenance and emergency repairs.

≈ Remove, disassemble, and inspect the pumps at least twice a year for broken or worn parts. This is just good preventive maintenance, but it also gets you familiar with disassembling



Periodic cleaning will keep your bilge pump from choking under a slurry of ick, unlike this one (above left). Regular inspection of your pump setup should include a look at fittings; notice this pump is missing a hose clamp (above right).

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and reassembling in case it's required in an emergency.

≈ Check that all pumps are firmly mounted, paying particular attention to the mounts, which may develop hairline cracks. List each pump by type, location, and size for future reference—don't forget shower and galley sumps—and make sure you have sufficient spare parts onboard for each. Check that each of the intake strainers is securely fastened in place, and while you're at it, clear them of any gunk that may have accumulated since the previous check.

≈ Check that float switches are securely mounted and clear of wires, hoses, and other obstructions that could impede operation of the float arm or flapper.