



Buoyed by Acquisitions and Expansions, South Florida's Marine Industry Grows

South Florida is renowned for its excellent weather and extensive network of interconnected waterways. But our region is more than just sunshine and sparkling water. The tri-county region made up of Broward, Miami-Dade, and Palm Beach counties, is a powerhouse contributor to Florida's overall economy. Each year, marine-related businesses generate more than \$18 billion in economic output.

Spend time in this region, whether on land or by sea, and you can't help but notice the diversity and volume of marine-related businesses. From one or two person specialty shops to full-service marinas employing hundreds and everything in between, these companies are the backbone of this economic contribution. As they grow, so, too, does our industry's economic contributions.

The past several years have seen a number of expansions and acquisitions. Each has fueled innovative ideas and new developments that keep the marine industry enjoying year-over-year economic growth.

January 2024 brought the merger of two renowned marine companies with Performance Inflatables Company's acquisition of AERÉ Marine Group. AERÉ is a global leader in inflatable solutions that protect and enhance marine vessels. Their most recognizable products include AERÉ Inflatable Fenders, Fenda-Sox fender covers, and the company's expandable and interchangeable system of inflatable docking components.

Performance Inflatables, long a highly-respected name in inflatable solutions for commercial and military applications, viewed the acquisition of AERÉ to the Performance portfolio as a key step towards offering inflatable marine solutions to every marine demographic.

Richard Heath, CEO of Performance Inflatables, noted at the time of the acquisition, "The businesses have

complimentary capabilities but most importantly, we share a similar culture that is dedicated to Customers, Quality, and Innovation. The addition of Gary and Vicki Abernathy along with the entire AERÉ staff to our team, with over 45 years in related businesses, will unleash further potential across the entire portfolio of innovative solutions and enhance our customers' experiences and ability to solve difficult challenges."

Another important development also finalized in early 2024 was the major expansion of FHG Marine Engineering. Founded in 2018, FHG is proof that South Florida is an excellent incubator for the startup and growth of successful marine businesses.

FHG started in 2018 with three employees working out of a single maintenance truck to provide service, repairs, and maintenance to private yachts, cruise ships, and commercial vessels. The company's rapid growth and regular addition of employees required the company to regularly add on more leased work space to keep up with demand. This resulted in a patchwork network of neighboring industrial spaces that proved to be less than ideal during South Florida's monsoon season. Running between buildings and moving parts in downpours was not a viable long-term solution.

This prompted co-founders Kathleen Hagan and Richard Grennen to begin a search for a larger, consolidated office and industrial space in 2023. Working together with Alberto Martinez of the commercial real estate firm Cresa, the trio spent nine months searching for a solution. They found it in early 2024 – a 25,000 square foot industrial space in Pompano Beach. The space includes an upscale reception and meeting area for client visits, plus a large working space that offers air conditioning to keep employees cool during the warm summer months.



Photo provided by Marine Industries Association of South Florida

It was turnkey ready, and FHG took occupancy in January 2024. The move and expansion allowed FHG to more easily take on international partnerships, as they could meet the specific requirements of discerning OEMs. Currently, FHG is an authorized distributor of HAMANN AG, Bollfilters, and QuantiParts, a Wärtsilä company.

Another familiar name making waves in the South Florida marine industry is Joshua Kerrigan, a native Floridian whose portfolio of marinas and marine service companies has grown steadily through both expansion and acquisition. He already owns and operates multiple facilities, including Yacht Management, a full-service boatyard on the New River, as well as a premier marina in Delray Beach. Kerrigan also holds the Broward County Sea Tow franchise, further solidifying his presence in the region.

At the heart of his operations is Yacht Management, based out of the Fort Lauderdale boatyard facility. Specializing in total yacht care and management, the division currently oversees 237 yachts ranging in size from 40 feet to a 185-foot superyacht—the largest in its program. From crew and payroll to flag-state compliance, class compliance, accounting, service, repairs, and long-term

maintenance, Yacht Management delivers a true turnover-ownership experience for clients who value reliability and discretion.

Kerrigan's ambition hasn't stopped there. In 2023, he turned his focus toward revitalizing an abandoned Miami-area marina. The result is Palm Bay Marina, slated to open in the second quarter of 2026. With 50 slips, direct access to Biscayne Bay and the Intracoastal Waterway, and a suite of exclusive amenities supported by Yacht Management's full-service offerings, Palm Bay is set to become one of Miami's premier destinations for yacht owners.

Despite the scale of his ventures, Kerrigan has maintained a family-driven approach to business. His mother, Michele Kerrigan, and sister, Brianna Kerrigan, both hold leadership roles, while his longtime friend and Vice President, Joe Donofrio, plays a key role in guiding the company's growth. Today, the organization employs 168 people—152 of them in South Florida—and is projected to reach \$21 million in revenue in 2025.

From marinas to management, Kerrigan's expanding enterprise reflects both his vision for the marine industry and his commitment to ensuring South Florida remains a world-class hub for yacht owners.



The Yacht Service Technician Apprenticeship Program- It Takes a Village

Florida's marine industry is responsible for nearly 300,000 jobs across Florida, with many of these roles consolidated in the South Florida region. Job opportunities are diverse, from sales and service to manufacturing, distribution and more. Yet our industry, like many others, faces a shortage of qualified individuals to fill technical roles.

This shortfall was the catalyst for the launch of the Yacht Service Technician Apprenticeship Program in 2020. A collaboration between the Marine Industries Association of South Florida (MIASF), the Florida Department of Education, and Atlantic Technical College, the program's goal is to provide apprentices with a basic set of shipyard skills to jump start a career in the marine industry.

Program qualifications are straightforward: candidates must be at least 18 years old and bring a positive attitude, aptitude, and willingness to learn. To participate, an apprentice must first be hired by one of the 33 companies engaged in the program. Once employed, they are formally enrolled and begin working full-time with their sponsoring company, gaining hands-on experience in the field while advancing through structured classroom instruction. Apprentices also participate in weekly, mandatory evening courses throughout the program's duration. This evening classwork offers deep dives into a variety of technical skills specific to the marine industry.

Graduates have the ability to earn competitive wages, often starting at levels that rival or exceed other skilled trades. According to Lori Wheeler, Vice President of MIASF, "This program offers you a 100% likelihood of employment upon successfully completing the course. In fact, we make sure every apprentice has a job secured before the program begins."



Photo provided by Marine Industries Association of South Florida

But none of this would be possible without the local marine businesses that employ apprentices during the program. Likewise, the marine industry leaders who share their subject matter expertise with course participants play a significant role in this success, too.

One of the marine businesses involved in the program since its inception is Bradford Marine, headquartered in Fort Lauderdale. Bradford employs apprentices full-time during the program and also leads one of the evening coursework series – the Finish Painting class, led by Bradford's own painting experts.

Bradford understands the value of a program like this to keep marine jobs filled by qualified individuals. Bradford actively recruits individuals who demonstrate interest in a marine industry career, introduces them to the apprenticeship program, then employs and supports them along the way. As Tom Krigger, Vice President and General Manager, notes, "As the participants move through the program, they are working full time with skilled

tradesmen, gaining valuable insight into the different skilled career paths available. As they spend time exploring the various areas available, they can discover where their interests and talents could best be applied for future success."

Another supporter and employer involved since the inception of the apprenticeship program is Frank & Jimmie's Propeller, also based in Fort Lauderdale. Experts in propulsion systems and running gear, Frank & Jimmie's program participation is especially important as no other trade schools in the region teach propeller repair.

Rafael Ramirez, General Manager, has personally taught the Propeller and Running Gear portion of the course for the past three years. He notes, "Our trade is a bit of dying art, and a true propeller technician is a jack of all trades. They need an understanding of metalsmithing, machining, welding, math, and software skills necessary for computerized propeller scanning, dynamic balancing, and 3D scanning and modeling."

Ramirez sees the program as vital to provide apprentices with not just real-world experiences and skills, but to foster a better understanding of the industry as a whole. Over the course of the full program, apprentices experience the diversity of roles within the service side of the marine industry. This helps them understand the interdependence of each discipline and tie it all together.

Advanced Mechanical Enterprises, another Fort Lauderdale business, also hires apprentices and teaches a portion of the evening coursework. All apprentices spend two weeknights training onsite to learn the importance of vibration analysis and learn how to measure torque and pitch using state-of-the-art equipment.

Teaching technical skills is just part of the program's success. There are also many marine industry experts who give their time to the program in other ways.

Kathleen Hagan of FHG Marine Engineering was recently a guest speaker and offered her insights into the soft skills required to enjoy career success. She covered topics like the seasonality of the marine industry, personal responsibility, and self-awareness of individual communication skills.

Other guest speakers have included Megan Lagasse, Marina Director of Pier 66, who discussed what it takes to operate a large, busy marina. Amie Nappi, Senior Yacht Support Manager at MarineMax, recently provided insights on running an active boat yard.

Now in its sixth year, the apprenticeship program is delivering results in other ways, too. Recent graduate Prem Lee Barbosa has become the new apprenticeship program coordinator. His appointment brings the apprenticeship program full-circle.



Enhancing the South Florida Marine Experience with Streamlined Legislation

Protecting South Florida's waterways and preserving a healthy marine ecosystem are top priorities for the Marine Industries Association of South Florida (MIASF). The region's marine businesses rely on a network of clean, navigable waters to thrive. MIASF has been actively involved in several legislative and environmental initiatives that aim to improve water quality, support marine commerce, and streamline regulatory processes. These efforts reflect a commitment to both environmental stewardship and economic vitality.

FORT LAUDERDALE'S FIRST CHIEF WATER OFFICER

Marco Aguilera, a lifelong Broward County resident, grew up immersed in South Florida's marine culture. His early experiences on the water, including time as a U.S. Navy Sea Cadet, helped him develop a deep appreciation for boating and marine safety. In 2021, Aguilera joined the City of Fort Lauderdale as a Code Enforcement Officer and was later promoted to Senior Code Officer. In that role, he led efforts to secure a boat for on-water code enforcement, enhancing the city's ability to monitor and maintain waterway regulations.

Recognizing his leadership and dedication, the City created a new position—Chief Water Officer—and appointed Aguilera to the role. His responsibilities now encompass all water-related issues in Fort Lauderdale, from environmental health to infrastructure and public safety.

One of Aguilera's first major initiatives was addressing the issue of fecal bacteria in local waterways. Weekly testing conducted by the Miami Waterkeeper organization revealed that many areas failed to meet safe swimming standards. Aguilera identified the lack of boat pump-out facilities as a key contributor to poor water quality.

To solve this, Aguilera secured funding through the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Clean Vessel Act for a mobile pump-out boat. The 26-foot vessel is expected to be fully operational by



Photo provided by Marine Industries Association of South Florida

early 2026. Boaters will be able to schedule free pump-out services using the FixIt FTL mobile app. The boat will travel to the vessel's location, making waste disposal more accessible and helping to improve water quality across Fort Lauderdale's 165 miles of navigable waterways.

EXPANDING MARINE FOREIGN TRADE ZONES

The marine industry has long relied on boat show bonds to temporarily import foreign vessels for events like the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show. These bonds allowed vessels to enter the U.S. without paying import duties, provided they were displayed temporarily and then exported. However, recent increases in tariffs and duties have made this option less viable, especially for high-value yachts.

To address this challenge, MIASF partnered with Fort Lauderdale's Foreign Trade Zone No. 241 to establish the first-ever foreign trade subzone for pleasure vessels in the United States. This groundbreaking initiative allows marine

businesses to benefit from the advantages of Foreign Trade Zones (FTZs), which are designated areas considered outside of U.S. Customs territory.

Within an FTZ, goods can be imported duty-free on a temporary basis, and companies can defer, reduce, or eliminate duties altogether. The FTZ designation offers several benefits to marine industry stakeholders:

- Vessels and components can be moved and displayed for up to four months without incurring import duties.
- Repairs and value-added services can be performed without paying sales or excise taxes.
- Products retain their Country-of-Origin status while in the FTZ.
- Items restricted by the EPA or other agencies can be handled within the zone.
- Duties and taxes are waived if the vessel is flagged outside the U.S.

Individual slips within marinas can be designated as FTZs, and the designation can be added or removed in as little as one day. Compass Logistics & Marine LLC has played a key role in supporting this initiative, offering expertise in FTZ applications and compliance management. Their administrative services ensure that participating marinas and businesses adhere to all regulations, creating a streamlined and efficient process.

This expansion of FTZs is a major win for the marine industry, allowing greater flexibility in showcasing, servicing, and importing vessels while reducing financial burdens and regulatory complexity.

USDA POLICY UPDATE AND NEW PILOT PROGRAM

The safe disposal of food waste from foreign vessels has long been a concern for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). To prevent the introduction of harmful pathogens and invasive species,

strict regulations require that all food waste from foreign sources be discarded in secure receptacles and incinerated. Vessels entering the U.S. are considered "foreign" for food waste purposes and must undergo a supervised "purge" by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to be reclassified as "domestic."

This purge process involves discarding all foreign food products under CBP supervision upon arrival at a U.S. port. Once purged, the vessel is relieved of the strict disposal requirements. However, a problematic aspect of this policy affected vessels that stocked up on U.S.-sourced fresh and frozen meats before traveling abroad. Upon returning, these vessels were required to discard the remaining meat—even though it originated in the U.S.—resulting in significant financial losses.

MIASF and its lobbyists successfully advocated for a policy change. On January 13, 2025, an exemption was granted allowing vessels to retain U.S.-sourced fresh and frozen meats upon return, eliminating the need to purge these items. This change represents a major improvement in regulatory efficiency and cost savings for boaters.

Building on this success, a new pilot program is set to launch in 2026, supported by a grant from the National Pork Producers Council. The program introduces a simplified compliance process for vessels entering select South Florida marinas. Under the pilot, boaters can self-report purge compliance without direct CBP oversight. This approach mirrors procedures already in place at private air facilities like Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport.

Participating marinas will provide dedicated dumpsters for food waste disposal, allowing boaters to comply with USDA regulations without the need for CBP supervision or sign-off. The program is designed to make it easier for smaller vessels returning from nearby foreign destinations—such as Bimini or The Bahamas—to meet regulatory requirements while reducing administrative burdens.



The Marine Research Hub Continues Its Work to Grow the Blue/Ocean Economy

The Blue and Ocean Economy brings together preservation and sustainability of the world's interconnected waterways with strategies for economic development and growth. It may not be a phrase instantly recognizable by all South Floridians, but it is of critical importance to everyone here, throughout our state, and around the world. Our region specifically depends on the network of streams, rivers, and coastal waterways to support a significant portion of the state's overall economy.

The marine industry alone contributes more than \$31 billion to Florida's economy each year. That contribution would not be possible without a healthy and sustainable aquatic ecosystem. Future development that aligns with preservation of our rivers, lakes, and oceans is a strategic way to ensure that the marine industry's contribution – and growth of our state's overall economy – continues.

The Marine Research Hub (MRH) is at the forefront of promoting awareness of and opportunities in the Blue and Ocean Economy. In 2024, the successful creation of the state's Office of Ocean Economy was due in large part to the coordinated efforts of MRH and bipartisan legislative support from State Rep. Chip LaMarca (R) and State Rep. Kelly Skidmore (D). As the Office of Ocean Economy (OOE) matures as an organization, it helps set the stage for future growth of the Blue Economy in Florida. MRH remains a supporter and partner of the OOE.

MRH's efforts in elevating the Blue Economy opportunities expanded in 2025 with the creation of The Blue Economy podcast, produced by Yachting International Radio. Launched in May 2025, the podcast brings together influential voices in the marine space to share insights and explore opportunities in the Blue Economy. Guests have included underwater exploration icons, like Fabien Cousteau and Patrick Lahey, and other startup innovators, like SailPlan's, Jacob Ruytenbeek.



Nova Southeastern University team, including NSU University President Dr. Moon and Katherine (MRH), standing on top of the Saqqarleq Glacier in Greenland, 2025. Photo: Marine Research Hub

Beyond informative discussions and trending topics, the podcast also bridges the gap between Blue Economy efforts and the global yachting community. To date, the podcast has tallied some impressive statistics with more than 20,000 viewers per episode. Collectively, reaching over 100,000 views from the U.S., Australia, Cyprus, the UAE, the UK, and more. It is available on all podcast platforms, Yachting International Radio's YouTube channel, and the MRH website.

Other MRH initiatives include further strengthening relationships with state colleges and universities, including Nova Southeastern University (NSU) and Florida Atlantic University (FAU). MRH Executive Director Katherine O'Fallon joined NSU and its Rising Seas Institute for a Greenland Fact-Finding Expedition in July 2025. NSU's Rising Seas Institute's mission is to explain the science behind sea level rise to people around the globe and across disciplines that will advance adaptation and mitigation to these changing conditions.

Led by oceanographer and Rising Seas Institute founder John Englander, the Greenland Expedition included touring glaciers and observing the significant changes in glacial ice. Glacial experts dove into the science and the impact not just in

Greenland but on coastal communities, like South Florida. NSU is developing digital media products from the expedition to raise public awareness, elevate the science, and the future opportunities for collaboration. MRH is also working with NSU to spotlight solution-based innovation through an NSU Ocean Summit in early 2026.

MRH is also collaborating with FAU's School for Environmental Coastal and Ocean Sustainability (ECOS) to support early research-based solutions to scale at FAU by sponsoring a Blue/Ocean Economy track within FAU's Annual Business Pitch Competition. The goal is to foster interdisciplinary collaboration across FAU's programs and create a pipeline of early ocean-connected solutions from FAU's research ecosystem. This track invites aspiring innovators to pitch resilient and sustainable solutions that help protect the health of our marine environment and gain support for the commercialization through FAU's business/economic growth resources, like their Entrepreneur Bootcamps, FAU Wave, and The Runway. The university's engagement also includes internships with MRH. This has been made possible with the philanthropic support of a local couple dedicated to building the pipeline for solutions.

MRH is striving to expand its engagement among other schools, including current partners, the University of Miami, Florida International University, and St. Thomas University. The goal is to foster a partnership that will expand the Blue/Ocean Economy-focused efforts across a broader swath of Florida's higher education system and bring more research out of the labs for commercialization opportunities. MRH also continues to support and sponsor Ocean Exchange, an accelerator pitch program, hosted in Fort Lauderdale, October 26-28th, 2025, which relocated to Fort Lauderdale with the support of MRH in 2019.

In tandem with collegiate outreach, MRH continues its efforts to promote and recognize innovation and sustainability in the commercial sector. Partnering with Informa Markets and the Marine Industries Association of South Florida (MIASF), MRH will support the 3rd Annual Innovation & Sustainability Award for exhibitors at Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show (FLIBS). The awards recognize marine businesses advancing the Blue Economy through sustainability and innovative efforts.

Often, these businesses are quiet leaders that support initiatives and achieve great things, but don't share those wins with the world. As Katherine O'Fallon of MRH notes, "This award is a way to help build awareness of these efforts not only with other industry insiders but with the general public, too."

The awards are presented at a special awards ceremony held onsite during the FLIBS event. FLIBS exhibitors can apply for four categories: Blue-Green Technology/Innovation; Sustainable Design/Architecture; Eco-Tourism, Sustainable Practices, & Conservation Projects; and Sustainable Company Project. More information is available on the MRH website, www.marineresearchhub.org.