

THE JOURNAL RECORD

Gavel to Gavel: Does federal maritime law matter in Oklahoma?

By: [Jason Seay](#) // GableGotwals // December 17, 2025



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Yes. Although [Oklahoma](#) is a landlocked state, it has the largest number of manmade lakes (more than 200). It is also the beginning of the 445-mile McClellan-Kerr navigation system, which vessels can take from the Port of Catoosa, southeast through Arkansas, and onto the Mississippi River. Many lakes in Eastern Oklahoma are connected to the McClellan-Kerr navigation system. Some of the most popular Oklahoma lakes may be subject to federal maritime jurisdiction for injuries and damages resulting from accidents occurring on these bodies of water, which could substantially limit recoverable damages for torts occurring on [navigable waters](#). Companies involved in commerce and industry on Oklahoma waters should understand the protections federal [maritime law](#) may provide them in the event of an accident.

[Federal](#) courts have original jurisdiction to hear admiralty and maritime claims regarding contracts and torts. Maritime jurisdiction involves two facets, which both must be satisfied:

- a navigable location and
- connection with maritime activity.

Where maritime [law](#) is implicated, an action for damages for [personal injury](#) must be brought within three years and [liability](#) for damage is capped at the value of the vessel and pending freight. This liability limitation extends to explosions and fires. Whether the liability limitation applies turns on whether the accident resulted from negligence or unseaworthiness and whether the owner of the vessel had prior knowledge of the risk giving rise to the accident. This liability limitation will typically only apply to personal injury and property damages. Other higher damage caps will apply for loss involving pollution, hazardous materials, and wreckage recovery.

The maritime law damage caps help companies align risk with insurability of vessels, results in faster settlements, and makes exposure to risk more predictable. For accidents causing loss in multiple jurisdictions, maritime law can help avoid inconsistent outcomes.

While it may be surprising that maritime law applies to a landlocked state like Oklahoma, it should not be ignored. It may help mitigate risk for companies operating on Oklahoma Waterways.

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