

Boat builders rebound in state

RODDIE BURRIS

THE STATE

Plans by Sea Pro Boats to resume manufacturing in the Midlands market might be one of the best indicators of how much the state's economy has rebounded since the Great Recession.

In 2014, consumers spent more than \$445.7 million on new powerboat, engine, trailer and boat accessories in South Carolina, according to the National Marine Manufacturers Association. That's a 23.4 percent increase in boat expenditures over 2013 — and good enough to land the Palmetto State 14th in spending in the United States.

"It's booming right now," said Jimmy Hancock, Sea Pro Boats co-owner, describing the ris-

ing market in South Carolina and nationally. "I think it has a lot to do with the economy coming back and there's a lot of pent-up demand. During the recession, I know the used boat market really did well, and I think a lot of that inventory has been gobbled up.

"So, the new boat market is starting to come back strong," said Hancock, who projects having a two-year backlog in boat orders once he begins manufacturing later in the year.

Sea Pro Boats will be one of four full-fledged boat manufacturers in the Midlands.

Since 2002, the area has been home to Encore Boat Builders LLC in Lexington County, one of the largest boat builders in the state. Tidewater Boats

opened in 2005, and Sea Hunt Boats, started by Vic and Bubba Roof, a father and son, opened in 1995. Tidewater Boats could not be reached for comment.

Encore might be more widely known by South Carolina boaters as "The Home of Bentley Pontoons" because the label can be seen in large letters by passers-by on its building on Two Notch Road in Lexington County.

In Columbia, Sea Hunt Boats' Vic Roof has been in the business since the 1960s when he and his brother, Alvin, owned Galaxy Boats. Vic split off in the 1960s to start Sunbird Boat Co., makers of a run-about ski boat built in the same Shop Road facility Sea Hunt Boats now occupies.

Before the recession, which started about eight years ago, the marine industry was booming, said Sea Hunt co-owner Joel Moss. While the industry is coming back, it's still down by historical standards, he said.

The culture of boats and boating has changed, Moss said.

Changes in the industry include better motors that are more powerful and more reliable than ever, Moss said, and capable of high speeds and logging more than 2,000 hours on the water. Boats also are now made of stronger composite materials such as fiberglass.

"It's a change in the culture," Moss said. In the Great Recession, the industry lost a lot of boat manufacturers and suppliers, he said.