



# Sea Scout Growth Plan

2020-2025

## Executive Summary

Sea Scout numbers (like those in other programs) have been declining for years. The reasons were many, but chief among them was a flawed “If we build it, they will come” attitude coupled with being disconnected from the rest of BSA, reinforced by non-Scout uniforms and attitudes of some long-standing leaders who were stuck in memories of the past. These obstacles have been overcome, the Sea Scout committees at all levels have accepted that growth is their direct responsibility, and concrete actions have been taken that have begun to show results as the number of units has begun to rise.

2019 ended with an increase of ships (Sea Scout units) from 377 at the end of 2018 to 391 at the end of 2019 - the first year over year increase in ships in more than a decade. We have processes and practices in place to enable us to start more ships than we lose and (pre-COVID) were on track for another increase in 2020. Present 2020 numbers look disappointing because so many councils remain fully or partially shut down and are unable to get recharterers processed. We are systematically working through those with good success and expect to recover almost all of the lapsed charters.

Our post-COVID outlook is excellent. We have the processes and more importantly, the dedicated and trained youth and adult Scout leaders in place to achieve significant year over year growth - at least 10% annually. This document will describe how we will do that, and will illustrate the growth potential over the next five years.

## Growth Focus

The most important action is the shift of focus on the part of the National and Regional Sea Scout Committees from program development to operations. That is, we need to promote and grow the program we have, and to take responsibility for growth at all levels. The three primary goals of the National Sea Scout Support Committee are to 1) start ships, 2) grow ships and 3) retain ships. Any activities that don't directly support at least one of those three are of secondary priority. We have focused heavily on metrics and accountability - we expect each Commodore (Committee Chair) at each level (Council, Area, Region and National) to know exactly how many ships they have, how many have rechartering challenges and why, how many are in the startup phase and what is needed to get them to the next step. Thanks to recently granted access to Commissioner Tools, we are able to have daily updates on the charter status of ships - we know immediately when a new ship has chartered, or a lapsed ship has rechartered.



Following is a list of proven growth accelerators. None of them will matter without committed volunteers (Commodores in our case) at all levels who accept that their most important role is using these as tools to start and grow ships. Luckily many of those individuals are already in place and on the job.

## Growth Accelerators

**Paddlecraft:** in 2016 we added paddlecraft to Sea Scout advancement; this enables ships to focus exclusively on paddlecraft (primarily canoes and kayaks) while still offering the full range of Sea Scout advancement, including Quartermaster rank, the highest rank in Sea Scouts. Already 20% of Sea Scout ships report a primary focus on paddlecraft. Paddlecraft are important because starting such a ship is an easy transition for Scouts BSA leaders with youth searching for higher adventure, because paddlecraft are inexpensive and widely available. Paddle sports are available almost everywhere in the United States, and because they represent the fastest growing segment of the boating industry - 350,000 kayaks are sold each year in the US, and 7.4% of the US population paddle at least occasionally. This is our most important growth initiative; the only thing holding us back is that most of BSA doesn't realize that this is an option.

**Council Volunteer Roles.** The role of Council Commodore has in the past been ill-defined and largely ceremonial. We have changed the expectations so that the Council Commodore (the lead Sea Scout volunteer in a Council and chair of the Sea Scout Committee if one has been established) has clear expectations for starting and growing ships as well as ensuring that local Sea Scout initiatives actively support other Council programs. We have also worked to develop materials to help with marketing, recruiting, and training to help Commodores be effective. Similar expectations are in place for Area and Regional Commodores. Presently, 84 Councils have designated Council Commodores. All Areas and Regions have designated Commodores.

**Seabadge.** Several years ago, we opened up our Seabadge training to any BSA adult leader regardless of their leadership role. Subsequently we have found this an effective way to promote the program and to introduce prospective leaders to Sea Scouts. It is rare that we conduct a Seabadge training without being able to directly trace the formation of at least 3 new ships to that course. Accordingly, we have worked to both improve the quality of the Seabadge course curriculum and to hold them much more often and in more locations. In 2019 the number of Seabadge courses doubled over previous years. The need for virtual training may accelerate this - the removal of cost and travel requirements have generated huge interest in online Seabadge. Unlike Wood Badge, Seabadge has no outdoor component, so can be fully adapted to run online without sacrifice to course content and we are proceeding to accelerate delivery of Seabadge as an online course. We plan a series of online Seabadge courses throughout 2020 and 2021 and anticipate that those will seed the development of a significant number of ships.

**Coast Guard Auxiliary.** In October 2019, BSA signed a MOA with the US Coast Guard Auxiliary and the Coast Guard Auxiliary Association (a non-profit corporation associated with the

Auxiliary), making Sea Scouts the Official Youth Program of the Coast Guard Auxiliary, but more importantly, encouraging and enabling the more than 800 local Auxiliary flotillas to charter ships. One of our greatest growth limitations is access to adult leaders with boating skills, and this arrangement attacks that in two ways - one is to have flotillas serve as charter organizations providing skilled adults, but the other is in giving all Sea Scouts adults and youth access to Coast Guard Auxiliary internal leadership and seamanship training.

**Commissioners.** As part of our operational focus we have adopted Commissioner Tools and their health assessments for our ships. This helps both sides - we are able to access their unit knowledge but they can also access ours, so that together we have a more accurate picture of the state of the ships. Ideally, Commodores act as program subject matter experts to help Commissioners, while the Commissioners act as subject matter experts on starting units and rechartering to help Commodores. This partnership works at all levels and helps us get accurate information about where help is needed to strengthen our units. The key impact here is in maintaining the health and retention of existing ships, but there is also valuable assistance in starting new units.

**Webinars.** We have found online webinars to be an effective and inexpensive way to share best practices and to provide informal training. The recordings provide value for years to come. Recent webinars that were especially effective include best practices for open houses, recruiting, using geofencing to market units, and teaching navigation.

**Drop lists.** We have been experimenting with using drop lists from Scouts BSA. While a generic appeal isn't often effective, an invitation to a specific event with a specific ship often can be. This isn't universally deployable - won't work if there are no viable local ships - but it is something we can build on as we develop better techniques.

**Enabling from afar.** Out of the 256 councils, 143 have ships. To grow, we have to combine remote mentoring (usually coordinated by Area Commodore) along with remote training - usually getting prospective leaders to a Seabadge somewhere. Virtual Seabadge makes this much easier. The hardest part is letting volunteers in councils without a Sea Scout presence know that we exist.

**Virtual operations.** An interesting outcome of shelter-in-place restrictions is that we have been forced to get good at remote collaboration and operations, and at effectively using digital tools. Many things, like roundtables and some training are actually better this way, because they engage more people from a broader geography and enable collaboration at a distance. We will be using what we've learned heavily going forward, even after restrictions are lifted. This is a key element of enabling from afar.

**Data access and analysis.** In the past it has taken months to detect charter successes or failures. Now that we have access to Commissioner Tools along with analysis scripts to understand the reports, we can find out in minutes what previously took weeks or months. The

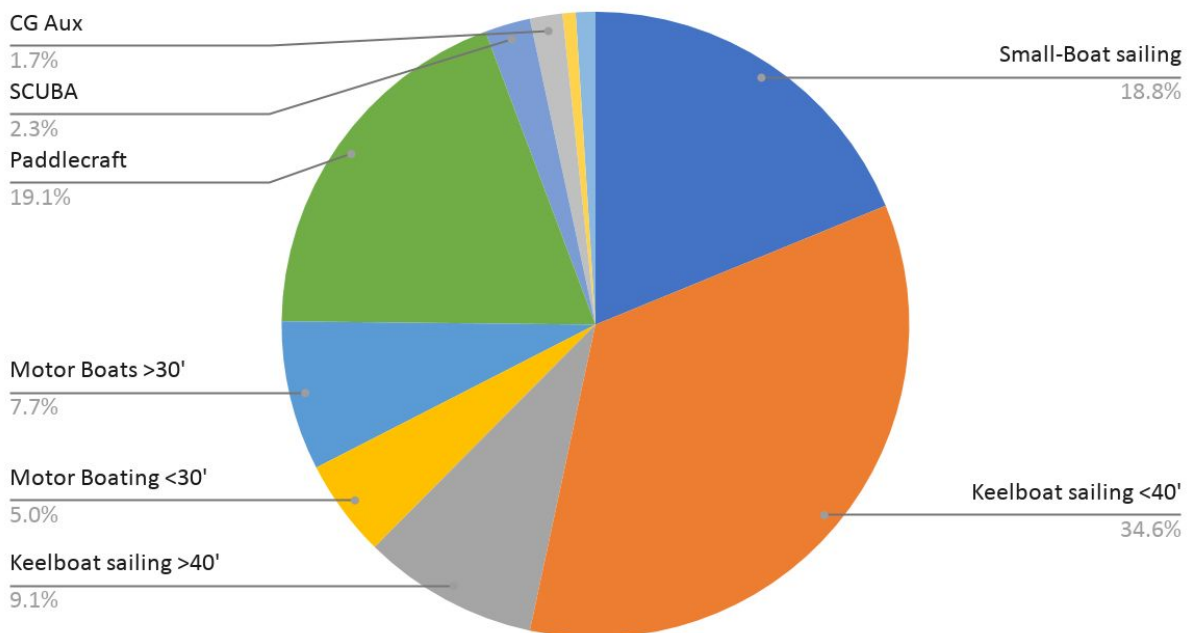
ability to know which problems are solved and which need continued attention greatly improves the effectiveness of our team.

**Youth Leadership.** Over the past three years, we have developed a capable cadre of youth leaders at all levels, who are undertaking significant projects. Their primary contributions include marketing to youth, communications with existing ships, development of new forms of program (especially online), and serving as the voice of the youth in the future direction of Sea Scouts. To help enable our youth to play these roles, we have worked to increase quality of and participation in our SEAL youth leadership training, as well as strongly encouraging Sea Scout youth to participate in NYLT and NAYLE.

## Ship Focus

As mentioned under Paddlecraft above, a major initiative is to shift the focus of newly formed ships toward paddlecraft. As you can see from the ship focus chart, more than half of ships today focus on small to medium sailboats, but an increasing number use paddlecraft. We need to focus our ships on boating experiences that offer good adventure, yet are available in every geography, are inexpensive, and very scalable. Most new ships focus on paddlecraft or small sailboats and this offers our best opportunity for growth. Large powerboats are increasingly rare in Sea Scouts, but represent mainly a West Coast legacy - only 3 ships use them outside Western Region. It is unlikely that any significant number of new ships using these boats will be started - the barriers to entry are high as are the operating costs. They are certainly not a focus.

### Ship Focus



## Obstacles To Growth

**Outdated perception.** Most professionals and volunteers, if they have an impression of Sea Scouts at all, think of us as weird people in Navy uniforms requiring 50' sailboats and salt water. None of that is true any more, but overcoming that perception and letting them know that we're viable anywhere that can float a kayak is critical.

**Rumors of our demise.** Continued rumors that BSA is discontinuing Sea Scouts have an impact at all levels - councils and volunteers are reluctant to commit to starting ships. The publicity of the recent Churchill recommendations and the ensuing uncertainty has been especially destructive. Clarity that we have a future is important.

**COVID.** The biggest immediate impact has been on rechartering. The combination of delayed charters (delayed primary due to increased fees and new background check requirements) and many councils being essentially shut down or in limited operation has prevented many ships intending to recharter from actually completing the process.. This makes the present membership numbers look worse than they are. Clearly it is more difficult to start ships in present times, but it isn't impossible and some progress has been made. Virtual training, meetings and events are actually reasonably effective for older Scouts (especially if we let them figure out what works), and Sea Scouts tend to be naturally collaborative between units, so Sea Scout ships are probably less negatively affected than other types of units.

**Lawsuits.** The highly public abuse lawsuits seem to have a less direct impact on Sea Scout recruiting than on younger Scout programs, but the publicity is not without impact.

**Perceived conflict.** Many Scoutmasters view us as competitors for their kids, yet studies show that enrolling youth in Sea Scouts extends their time in Scouting; most retain a connection to their troop and become valued assets.

**Succession planning.** Like all unit types, retaining our units is a challenge - it doesn't help if we start 2 ships but lose 3. One of the biggest factors is succession planning for key adult leaders such as Skippers (primary unit leader in Sea Scouts). Increasing the awareness of and interest in Sea Scouts within BSA will help, but does not fully address.

**Unengaged volunteers.** While we have made great strides in getting people into Commodore roles who understand that their primary job as a volunteer is to grow Sea Scouts, some remain who are not engaged and who need to be replaced.

## Ships vs Members

From a National and Regional level, it is difficult to influence individual youth membership, but it is possible to influence the start and retention of units, so this is our focus and what we track on a day-to-day basis. And if we start/retain enough ships, membership will follow. But there are some considerations compared to other types of BSA units. Troops and Packs typically start

large - with a big influx either from fall recruiting or crossovers, and then suffer gradual attrition through the year. Ships (and Crews) typically start small - with a core group of half a dozen or so interested youth, and grow by peer recruiting and sometimes by open houses and similar events. Thus, new ships are typically small but grow gradually, which means that if there are more new ships in the mix, that average ship size goes down. As of the end of 2019, the average size of a ship is 8 primary youth members, or 11 with the inclusion of multiples. On average, there are nearly as many registered adults as youth (5.7 per ship primary, 9 total).

## Current State

At the end of 2019, we had 3093 primary registered Sea Scouts, with 1202 additional multiple registered. About 17% were registered as VP (adult program participant - those 18-20), but since that happens AFTER 18th birthday (registration change isn't reflected until recharter typically) the real number is more likely to be about 20%. There were 2232 primary registered Sea Scout adults and another 1183 multiple registered adults, for a total of 3415. That's about 9 adults per ship. There are an average of 8 primary registered youth per ship, or 11 total registered youth per ship. Please note that while 18-20-year-olds are allowed to continue working toward advancement and to hold leadership roles, they are registered as adult program participants (VP position code) with the same background check and youth protection training as any adults, and are treated as adults for youth protection purposes including lodging arrangements.

As with most BSA unit types, there seems to be a normal attrition rate of lost units each year of about 10%. By specifically contacting each ship periodically (either via Commodore or Commissioner), we have had some success in recent years in reducing these losses. Even so, to break even, we have to start 10% new ships each year. To grow, we have to start more. The membership pattern is typical of all BSA units - with most charters expiring on December 31, but with a grace period of 2 months before they are dropped from the rolls, peak membership occurs at the end of the year, with a precipitous drop in March, and the rest of the year is spent trying to recover from that loss and hopefully growing beyond it.

This year, of course, is an anomaly. Many units who believed they had successfully chartered, had not, because their paperwork hadn't been processed by councils before they shut down, or because they were slow getting paperwork submitted (fee increase and additional background check authorizations are the most frequent reasons) they couldn't complete the process due to shutdown. We expected a loss of about 40 ships but instead lost 90. Each Regional Commodore took ownership of that list and arranged for direct contact of every unit so that we knew the exact status, and since, have systematically worked those lists to try to recover as many as possible. The lesson learned is that we need to start working the traditional Commissioner recharter health check-ins with all Ships starting in August. One-on-one contact with the Skipper and Committee Chair will ensure the Ship plans to recharter at the end of the charter year. This has proved to be successful in Councils where it has been adopted. It appears the Commissioners may not be prioritizing Ships, focusing instead on the core

programs, which means that Council and Area Commodores need to take this action in support of and in concert with the Commissioner at the appropriate level.

As of July 2020, 32 of the excess drops have been recovered, and we believe that 29 more will probably be recovered (and are working on that). This leaves us with 340 properly chartered ships, with the potential to get back to 369, not accounting for new ship starts - there are 20 new ships presently in progress with reasonable probability of chartering in 2020. That would get us to 389, which is possible but certainly a best case scenario. A 5% loss (given the circumstances, not terrible) would result in an end of year at 370, and is a safer assumption.

## Economic Impact

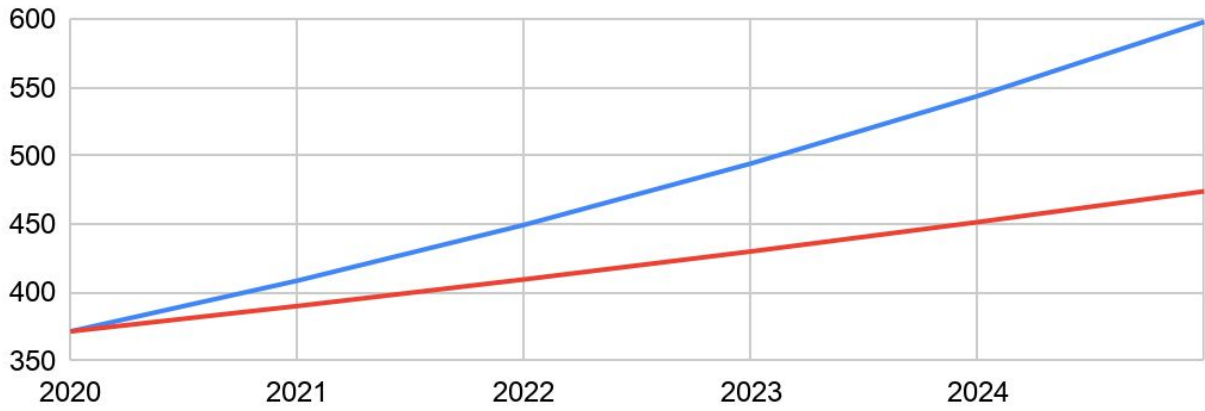
Applying the 2020 fee structure to end of 2019 numbers, we have 3093 primary registered youth at \$66, plus 2232 primary registered adults at \$42, plus 391 charters at \$75 for a total of about \$327K. With a 5% loss in 2020 (allowing for COVID impact), the number would be about \$310K.

## Projections

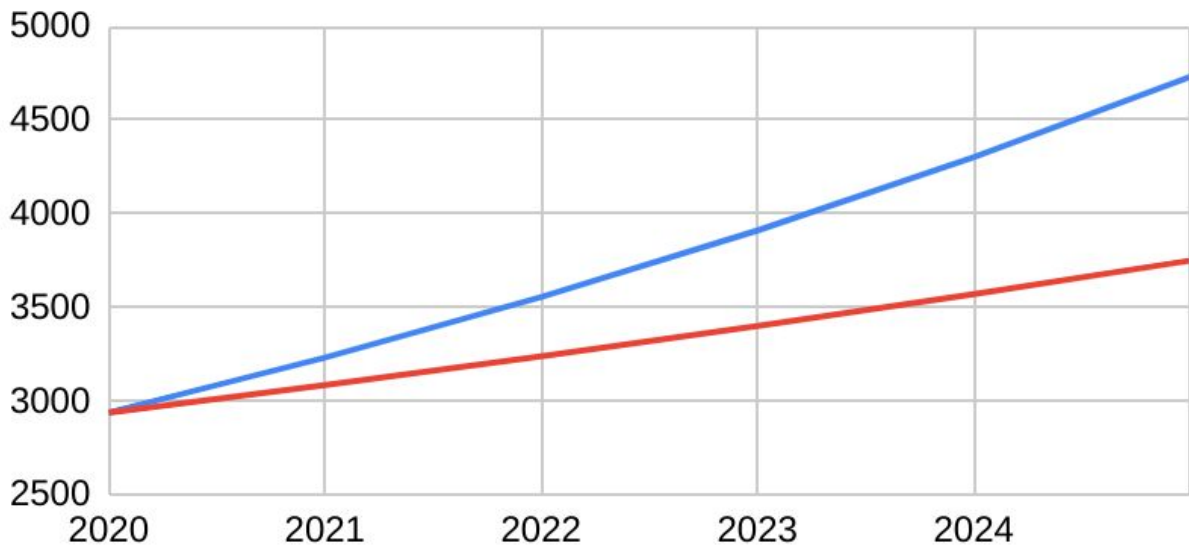
Post-COVID and post-bankruptcy, 10% annual growth is very achievable. Consider that 10% growth would require increasing by 40 ships - or, one new ship for every 3 councils with ships, which is quite doable given the groundwork we have laid. Increasing the average ship size by 1 would also accomplish this. The Coast Guard Auxiliary relationship should result in at least 20 new ships per year in 2021 and 2022, perhaps tapering off afterward. Continued paddlecraft focus with good council awareness would easily generate the rest as spinouts from Scouts BSA troops.

These charts are based on the assumption that 2020 represents a 5% loss over 2019, but that growth resumes in 2021. The red line represents 5% annual growth, the blue line 10% annual growth. The revenue (charter + member fees) chart assumes the 2020 fee structure, and does not include the \$25 new member fee but does include primary adult registrations. The number of primary youth includes adult program participants (those 18-20). Removing them would represent a decrease of about 20% with an unknown impact on the number of ships. Including multiple-registered youth and adult program participants increases the participant count by about 30%.

## Ships

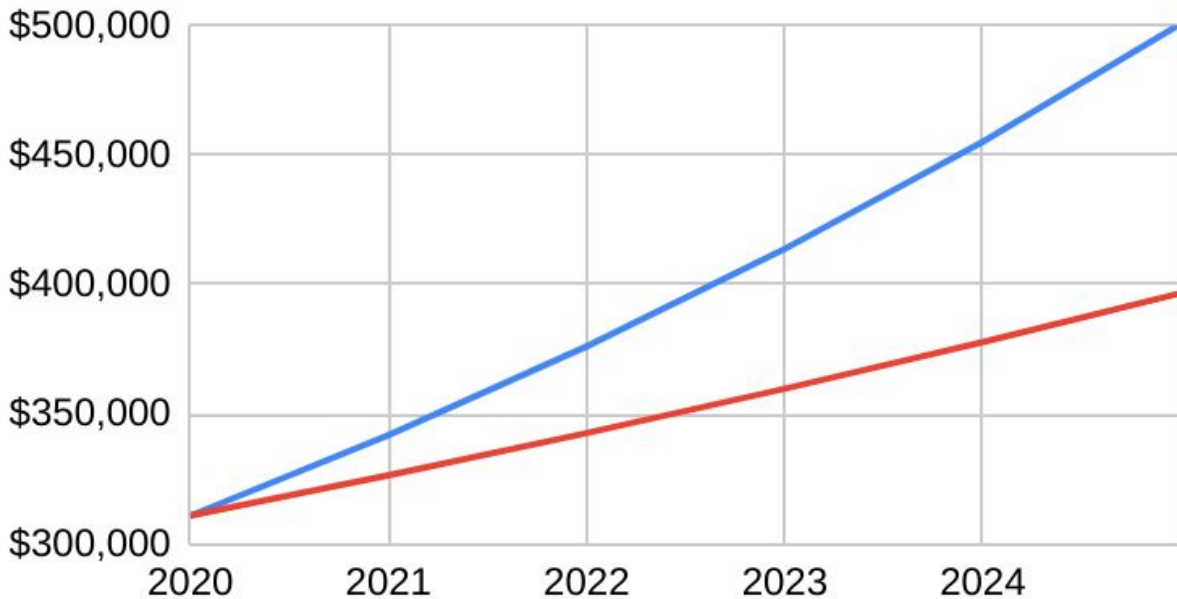


## Primary Youth





# Charter + Membership Fees



## Upside

You may be wondering whether more aggressive growth is possible. Could we get more than 10%? The answer is yes, but it would take two things that are beyond the control of the Sea Scout community.

First, we would need improved visibility within BSA. It is frankly difficult to find out that we exist in most councils - there is no mention of Sea Scouts on the council website and it is never mentioned as an option in most forums. While this has improved significantly in the five years since Sea Scouts was elevated to a top level program, there is far to go. If the Churchill proposal to “Consolidate local and national websites into a single unified web platform” proceeds, this could be a beneficial side effect for Sea Scouts as that could give us the opportunity to efficiently address this.

Second, we would need some sort of systematic promotion of older Scout programs to older youth in Scouts BSA as an option to further their Scouting careers and access more specialized high adventure. This is more challenging and requires overcoming the prejudice of Scoutmasters who view older programs as ‘stealing’ their youth, when the reality is that boredom with the program aimed at 11-14 year olds coupled with weariness dealing with ‘little kids’ drives them to seek other things to do. Why not have Scouting be the other thing they choose? It is well documented that participation in older Scout programs such as Sea Scouting and Venturing improves retention and extends time in Scouting - the 2019 National Outdoor Conference at Philmont presented data that the average tenure in Scouts BSA is 29.0 months

and that Scouts BSA loses 50% of its membership in the 13-15 age range. That same conference report demonstrated that if a Scout joins a Sea Scout Ship or a Venturing Crew, their Scouting tenure will increase by 16.5 months to a total 45.5 months, which is a 57% increase.

Even without these two initiatives being in place, significant growth is still well within our grasp; we have laid the groundwork for it and are executing.

## Conclusion

All of the creative work is done. We reinvented and modernized the program, changed the culture and recruited effective partners. All that remains is to hold things together minimizing losses until we get past COVID and the bankruptcy, then use what we have put in place to start lots of ships. Sea Scouts in 2025 will be at least half again bigger than it is today.

## For More Information

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See also <https://seascout.org>.