Department of Natural Resources hopes to avoid deadly summer

BY ANDREW MOORE
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The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources is hoping that an unusually high fatality rate on state lakes last year was a fluke.

As the temperatures creep into the 80's and 90's, more and more people are taking to the water, including lakes Jocassee, Hartwell and Keowee.

"Each year, it gets earlier," Lt. Robert McCullough of DNR said. "We have more and more boaters in this state every year. Those numbers continue to rise.

"We've had hot weather, so it's already started."

Once boaters and swimmers hit the water, so does DNR. Traditionally, the water season lasts from Memorial Day until Labor Day, but there's been a flurry of activity in recent years outside that time frame. In fact, McCullough said, the vast majority of fatalities last year didn't even occur in the summer.

There was a dramatic spike in deaths in Palmetto State waters in 2010, with 26 fatalities dwarfing the statistics of the previous two years, which had 11 and 13 deaths, respectively.

McCullough said there's usually no explanation for such spikes.

"Several years ago, we had the same thing. We'd had 18 deaths, then it dropped to 16 and then we had 33," he said. "Sometimes, people are just luckier than others.

"Occasionally you'll get a spike, and every time you have one, you hope it's the last one."

In most of those incidents, there's one common theme.

"It still holds true year in and year out, in about 80 percent of the cases, if they were wearing life jackets, they'd still be alive," McCullough said.

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> **Lt. Robert McCullough**
> Department of Natural Resources

DNR expects to step up its patrols as it gets warmer, but the Friends of Lake Keowee Society is pushing for even more help for the DNR.

Ben Turetzky, executive director of FOLKS, said the organization has asked Duke Energy to consider footing the bill for extra patrols on Lake Keowee.

"The concern is that, with the way the state's budget is, there aren't that many officers on duty," Turetzky said. "We have no qualms that DNR people on the ground do an excellent job. But Lake Keowee is 18,000 acres. Hartwell is 56,000 acres and the same people have responsibility for both."

FOLKS cites the actions of another energy provider, Alcoa, which actually paid for increased patrols as part of its shoreline management plan.

Sandra Magee, spokesperson for Duke Energy, said the company is looking into any possible additional safety applications as part of its relicensing process.

"Boaters' perception of their safety while boating at Lake Jocassee and Lake Keowee is being studied in conjunction with the Keowee-Toxaway project relicensing," Magee said. She cites company-sponsored Safe Kids Day and National Hunting and Fishing Day as annual events at the World of Energy that promote boating safety.

"Based upon the results of the relicensing studies related to recreation, Duke Energy and relicensing participants will evaluate if other actions are appropriate. These studies begin next year," she said.

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With temperatures on the rise, boating activity is expected to increase on Jocassee and Keowee and Hartwell lakes. Likewise, law enforcement has said it will be increasing patrols in an effort to cut back on the number of fatalities recorded in recent years.

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