Lake Keowee residents upset about loss of buoys

Community members express concerns about safety

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OCONEE COUNTY - Lake Keowee residents say state officials have created a hazardous situation by removing more than 100 buoys that warned boaters to slow down in coves crowded with docks and swimmers.

Ed Weiland said he was almost run over by a boater in the cove behind his home one evening earlier this month.

"I dove off my dock, went out about eight or 10 strokes, came up, and all of the sudden there was a boat bearing down on me," he said at a meeting last week that the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources conducted at Clemson University. "I had to dive."

Summing up the sentiment of dozens of homeowners at the meeting, Weiland said, "Let us have our buoys back."

As the area became more developed in the past two decades, residents placed buoys at the entrances to dozens of Lake Keowee coves urging boaters to maintain a no-wake speed, said Ben Turetzky, executive director of the Friends of Lake Keowee Society.

"These buoys were put in because of dangerous activities," he said.

Natural Resources Department officers removed 133 of the buoys earlier this year.

Donnie Pritchard, one of the officials of that agency who spoke at the meeting Tuesday, said the array of buoys on Lake Keowee was creating confusion. Under state law, Pritchard said, his agency is responsible for the markers on South Carolina waterways.

Pritchard told the residents at the meeting that while they could apply to his agency to put no-wake buoys on their coves, such requests will likely be turned down. He said no-wake zones typically are reserved for marinas that sell fuel and for boat landings.

"If you send in for a wake-zone request on your piece of property and you live in a cove, it is not going to be approved," Pritchard said.

With only 13 officers assigned to patrol lakes Hartwell, Keowee and Jocassee, residents complain the Natural Resources Department lacks the manpower to enforce state boating rules, including a regulation requiring all vessels to operate at idle speed within 50 feet of docks.

"They don't have enough people, and there are too many coves," said Terry Allen, whose lives on Lake Keowee.

Residents say the number of problems has increased since the buoys were removed.

Allen's neighbors, Gene Dahlquist and Bruce Johnson, said an inner tube being pulled by a speeding boat almost slammed into a dock on their cove recently.

Turetzky said he is hearing similar stories.

"Once the buoys were taken out, people went back to their old habits of coming in at full speed," he said.

Visiting fishermen and personal watercraft operators are among the most common scofflaws, residents said.

Homeowner Wayne Hobin said people who rent boats also contribute to unsafe conditions on the lake.

"They plow around wherever they want and they have not a clue what they are doing," he said.

State Sen. Thomas Alexander, a Republican from Walhalla whose district includes Lake Keowee, said he is working with officials at the Natural Resources Department to find a solution. He wants to come up with a process that would allow residents to put their buoys back in the water.

"I think the buoys that were out for years served a good purpose," he said. "It is a safety issue."

Lake Keowee resident Betty Lehner, who lives with her husband on Spinnaker Cove, said "it is just absurd to have taken out the buoys in the first place."

"They took a system that worked and eliminated it," she said. "Essentially they fixed what wasn't broken."

Lehner enjoys taking a morning dip in the lake.

"I used to be very confident about swimming in the cove when the buoys were in place," she said.

But now, "I am pretty defenseless out there," Lehner said. "I am concerned that I am going to be killed or maimed."

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