

KEN OSBURN / Staff

Rocky Wells, owner of Gap Hill Landing on Lake Keowee, is well stocked in anticipation of a busy Fourth of July weekend.

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# Lake patrols hope for smooth sailing on holiday

## Boaters urged to follow safety rules with busy weekend expected

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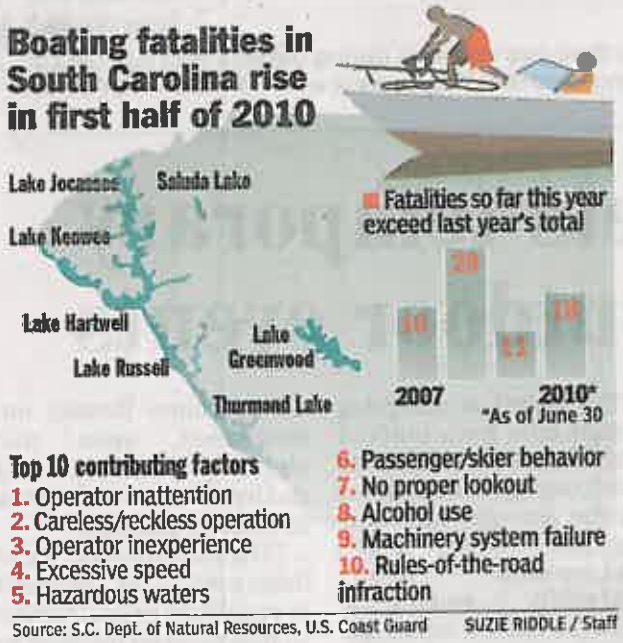
CLEMSON — Mostly sunny skies and crowded waters — that's the forecast for Upstate lakes this Independence Day weekend.

With a three-day holiday weekend and good weather forecast through Monday, "We expect it to be very busy," said Billy Birdwell, a spokesman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Rocky Wells, who owns a store at the Gap Hill boat landing on Lake Keowee in Pickens County, said Thursday that activity is already picking up and the economy may be loosening up a bit this year. Many area manufacturing plants shut down for maintenance around the Fourth of July, giving workers a week-long vacation, and he's seeing a lot of them at the lake.

"There seems to be a lot more people moving around than the last two years," Wells said.

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# LAKES

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The lakes are full of water and inviting after several years of drought.

Lake Hartwell, one of the corps' most popular lakes in the eastern United States, logged 1.26 million visits in May, up from 1.22 million in May of 2009, according to corps data. While the corps doesn't specifically track holiday weekends, the data shows May, June and July are the busiest months on the lake.

Traffic has been up all year compared to last year, and the trend is expected to continue, said Zachary Harkness, chief corps ranger on Hartwell.

With big crowds expected, safety is a concern.

More people have died on South Carolina waters in the first half of this year than in all of 2009 or 2007, said Brett Witt, a spokesman for the state Department of Natural Resources.

There have been 18 boating fatalities this year, as of June 30, compared to 11 last year and 16 in 2007. There were 29 boating fatalities in 2008.

DNR will have every available law enforcement officer on the water over the holiday weekend, watching for boating under the influence and other dangerous infractions, Witt said. The corps also will have extra rangers and volunteers at its lakes over the three-day weekend, Harkness said.

The cardinal rule for water safety is to wear a life jacket.

"That will save more lives of more folks than almost anything else we can do," Witt said.

People can sign a pledge to wear life jackets online through the corps' "Wear It" campaign at www.safeboatingcampaign.com/pledge-card.htm.

"We are trying to get people to realize they need to wear a life jacket whether they are in the boat, on the dock or fishing along the shoreline," Birdwell said. "The floor of the lake is very unpredictable and can drop off suddenly."

Even someone sitting on a dock can be at risk of falling into the water. Wearing a life jacket ensures that you will pop right back up even if you hit your head or fall into deep water. It could make the difference between going home and laughing about it or going to the morgue, Birdwell said.

A life jacket loaner program is offered by the corps at all of the corps-operated campgrounds and major recreation areas on Lake Hartwell, Harkness said. The life jackets are available at no charge but must be returned by the end of the day.

Along with getting a ticket, boaters caught without adequate life jackets on board are issued DNR life jackets to make up the difference and told to go to a store and buy the needed number and leave the DNR life jackets to be picked up at the store. Wells said he's had three DNR life jackets brought in so far this season.

Fines can range as high as $468, and state law requires that children under age 12 in a boat less than 16 feet long wear a personal flotation device. More information on the law is available at www.boated.com/sc/handbook/pfds.htm.

Wearing life jackets is Witt's No. 1 safety message; using common sense is No. 2.

Make sure the boat is properly outfitted and have enough life jackets for everyone aboard. Don't drink and drive on the highway or the water. Have a designated driver — for the boat as well as the car — and watch the weather, Witt said.

If the weather starts getting bad and the water starts getting rough, "it may be time to call it a day," Witt said.

And take advantage of boating education classes, Witt said. Driving a boat looks simple, but there's a lot more to it than just steering.

The corps also asks people to swim only in designated swimming areas. A big reason for this is the uncertain nature of the lake floor. Swimming after dark isn't recommended, Birdwell said.