

SINKING FAST

LOW LAKES trigger safety warnings

Boaters, swimmers urged to take extra care as hazards may be nearer surface

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Hot, sunny days should mean large crowds at Upstate lakes this Labor Day weekend, but low water levels and dry conditions pose hazards on crowded waters.

"We want boaters to enjoy their time on the water, but they need to be extra careful this weekend. The lakes will be busy, and with water levels down, submerged obstructions can be a hazard," said Sandra Magee, a Duke Energy spokeswoman.

Swimmers and water skiers also need to be alert to hazards just below the surface as lake levels fall. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has issued a warning that swimming or wading outside designated swimming areas "can pose special dangers due to uneven and unpredictable slopes and underwater obstructions."

The corps advises wearing life jackets when swimming, boating or fishing.

So far this year, 12 people have died in boating accidents in South

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Low lake levels could make for hazardous boating conditions over the three-day weekend as visitors enjoy the end of the summer season. KEN OSBURN/STAFF



Boaters and swimmers are being urged to take precautions on Upstate lakes this weekend a falling water levels could create hazards. KEN OSBURN/GREENVILLE NEWS

LAKES

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Carolina, and 26 people lost their lives while boating on waters in the state in 2010, according to state Department of Natural Resources data.

"All available officers will be in the field this weekend given how busy it will be," said Brett Witt, DNR spokesman. "We currently have 212 officers in the field around the state. They will be looking for what they always do: proper life jackets, boating under the influence, reckless operation and even littering."

In addition, DNR will offer courtesy boat inspections at the Twin Lakes boat ramp on Lake Hartwell from 10 a.m. until noon Monday, Witt said.

An extra set of eyes will be on the water guarding against unsafe boating behavior this year. The Anderson County Sheriff's Office has now assigned an officer full time to lake patrol.

"It will considerably improve safety and security for Anderson County lake residents and visitors," said Herb Burnham, president of the Lake Hartwell Association, which asked the sheriff to increase lake patrols.

The permanent year-round patrol starts just in time for the busy three-day weekend.

The lake officer has authority to cite people for not having enough life jackets, boating under the influence and other boating violations, said Chad McBride of the Sheriff's Office.

Not only are lakes low — Jocassee is 16 feet below full pool and Hartwell is six feet down — the land around the lakes is dangerously dry. The National Weather Service recorded less than an inch of rain at the Greenville airport in August and reports even drier conditions in the Anderson area around Lake Hartwell.

The woods are very dry, which increases the risk of wildfire going into the holiday weekend, said Darryl Jones, forest protection and fire chief for the state Forestry Commission.

Typically, there are more wildfires on weekends because more people are out doing yard work and burning debris and hiking and camping and building campfires, Jones said. With the current dry conditions and increased holiday weekend activity, there is more potential for fires getting out of control, Jones said.

Camping and fires are prohibited on the islands on Keowee and Jocassee, Magee said.