Oconee Sheriff's Office expands lake patrols

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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Mike Crenshaw
Sheriff, Oconee County

Oconee County Sheriff's deputies are expanding their presence on lakes this summer with additional officers and more patrolling during the week and on weekends.

"Over the years we have had thefts on the lakes at boat docks and on occasion we've had homes that have been broken into," said Sheriff Mike Crenshaw. "I felt like it was important to increase our presence out on the lakes. We were able to get some grant money to buy one of the boats last year. We want to put the boats to use as much as we can."

Eight officers are assigned to the marine unit this summer, up from two to three officers in previous years. The unit has two patrol boats and a pontoon boat used for special operations teams on the lake. Cpl. Jay Freeman, who supervises the marine unit, said the officers will be on the water during the week rather than just on weekends.

"We want to provide better service on the water as opposed to just those holiday weekends," said Freeman. "We've expanded it to more officers so we can provide a better presence the summertime.

"Our main objective this summer is going to be to make sure, number one, that everybody's safe," Freeman added. "We want people to feel they can call us if there's an issue going on. Basically, we're trying to be more approachable, not that we weren't approachable in the past, but we're going to have more opportunities where we can actually talk to people."

Freeman, who works as a school resource officer during the school year, is in his fifth year working with the marine unit. He said other officers in the unit also work in other areas of the sheriff's office.

"At just Keowee alone, we have 300 miles of shoreline that we help patrol with Pickens County," said Freeman. "Every 100 feet, 200 feet or 300 feet – that's somebody's backyard. With the amount of residents who live on Keowee full time, at Hartwell and Jocassee, we just feel like that is an added patrol that we want to have a greater presence on the water than we have in the past.

"We get very crowded on the holiday weekends, Memorial Day and Fourth of July and Labor Day," he added. "What we've been missing is that community policing in the week, getting out and talking to the folks that live there on the water full time."

Oconee County and Duke Energy are working on an agreement that would allow county fire and law enforcement to have use of a dock on Mosquito Point at Lake Keowee. Freeman said, if approved, the dock would provide additional help to the marine unit.

"I do see (the dock) will be beneficial for quick response to emergencies on the water as well the convenience of having a boat ramp and being able to tie the boats off," he said.

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SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

The Oconee County Sheriff's Office marine unit will be out more often this summer patrolling the waters of local lakes. There are now eight officers assigned to the unit, up from the two to three officers in recent years.