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Programs aim to increase water safety in Oconee

Ray Chandler / Special to Independent Mail

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WALHALLA — Four drownings have occurred on Lake Keowee in the last 30 days, three of them in Oconee County waters and two of those in county parks.

But cooperative efforts between the Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism department, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and other groups aim at making use of the lakes as safe as possible.

There are now five kiosks in Oconee County where the public can borrow a life jacket for use on or near the water, Phil Shirley, county parks director, said Tuesday.

The fifth kiosk was completed Tuesday at the county's High Falls Park in northern Oconee County, Shirley said, and a sixth will soon be added at the county's Chau Ram Park near Westminster.

Forty-five life jackets provided by the natural resources department are available, Shirley said, and it is not uncommon to have most or all of them borrowed. He said there has not been a problem with their not being returned by the public.

"Our campsites are running at about 80 percent occupancy," Shirley said. "And a lot more people than that are just using the lake, so we're seeing a busy season."

The kiosks for loaner life jackets began with the impetus of the Keese Foundation at the county's South Cove park in March. Craig Keese, an Oconee County native of the Oakway community, started the foundation after the 2010 drowning of his son and grandson on a Missouri lake. Neither was wearing a life jacket. Other agencies and groups, such as Duke Energy and the Friends of Lake Keowee Society, have joined in the effort as well.

"We seldom have people drown if they're wearing life jackets," said Lance Cpl. Eric Martin of the natural resources department, who joined Shirley to brief Oconee County officials on efforts to increase water safety and awareness.

Not only are life jackets and making sure boaters have them a large focus of the department's inspection program, Martin said, but they also are a key part of the agency's education programs.

"For one thing, life jackets have to be the right size," Martin said. "A 4-year-old child will slip out of an adult life jacket."

Another focus for educating the public, Martin said, is on the dangers of low lake levels, such as seen now on area lakes, especially Hartwell Lake.

"People get confused with low water," Martin said. "They think if they can walk in the water, it's safe. But there are ridges and sinkholes that can lead them to step into deep water with their very next step."

Alcohol continues to be a main factor in a lot of lake- and boating- related accidents, Martin said.

"People get hot and don't eat and exert themselves, and it takes less alcohol to impair them on the water than it does on land," Martin said.

Over the July 4th holiday, Martin said, the department made four alcohol-related arrests. "That's about average," he said.

Preventing deaths means educating swimmers early, Shirley said, and the goal, in conjunction with the county school system, is to make sure every third-grader can swim.At the moment, about 125 students have been taught to swim, Shirley said, and a long-range goal is the building of a YMCA in the county that will facilitate the swimming instruction program.

The county parks department is also for the first time marking out designated swimming areas in county parks, Shirley said. The areas will not be roped off and swimming will not be confined to the areas, but the zones will be clearly indicated with buoys and depth markers.

"In those areas, swimmers will know exactly how deep the water is," he said.



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