State says some buoys are illegal

Safety issues at Lake Keowee discussed

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Privately — and illegally — placed buoys have become a problem on lakes throughout South Carolina, Pritcher, with DNR law enforcement, told residents at the Duke World of Energy facility, though Lake Keowee has among the highest numbers. Officers have so far collected about 50 from the lower end of the lake.

Law officers with the state Department of Natural Resources would like to return buoys they confiscated months ago from the mouths of Lake Keowee coves and at the end of docks.

But the owners of those buoys, each taller than a fire hydrant, have little intention of reclaiming them.

About 50 residents gathered Thursday at a Friends of the Lake Keowee Society meeting to listen as DNR officials explained safety issues surrounding the illegally placed buoys, and there DNR Lt. Donnie Pritcher tried to coax residents into retrieving the markers.

"I'd like to ask if anyone wants their buoy back," Pritcher asked.

"What are we going to do with them?" one resident called out, eliciting chuckles from the audience.

Months ago, officials started collecting private buoys anchored by Lake Keowee residents, enforcing a decades-old law that grants authority to the DNR, under an agreement with Duke Energy, to place navigation aids in the water. But many of the buoys have been on Lake Keowee waters for years, placed by residents who said the markers were effective at keeping boat and jet skis a safe distance from docks and people in the water.

South Carolina law requires watercrafts to be 50 feet from structures and swimmers. But speeding boats and personal watercraft often come well inside that limit, creating wakes dangerous to children in the water or capable of damaging docks, said Lake Keowee resident Donna Furnari.

"The thing is the buoys were working," she said. "It's like a security camera without you having to be there."

The two buoys floating at the end of her small cove deterred speeding boats, she said. Since they've been removed, boating traffic has increased and is often too fast, too close and too dangerous.

The lake has about 106 official buoys, he said, all placed by the DNR with a marking system that can indicate no-wake zones near swimming areas or fueling facilities. The agency does not zone for protection of personal property or erosion, he said.

Some of the private buoys have been on the lake so long that they predated homeowners and have been logged on official maps, said Ben Turetzky, executive director of the Friends of Lake Keowee Society. When DNR officials removed them without warning, residents were perplexed.

"People aren't putting them up to say 'Keep out of my backyard,'" he said. "People are using them to stop boating in an unsafe manner that is contrary to the law."

Turetzky said he hopes a compromise can be reached, perhaps involving the smaller, basketball-sized buoys and better signage at boat ramps. The presence of DNR officers on the lake does encourage safer boating, but state resources are stretched thin — seven boats in Jocassee, Hartwell and Keowee waters — and officials simply can't be everywhere.

Also in attendance was the district's state senator, Tom Alexander, who said he intends to sit down with the agency and other stakeholders to find a balance that encourages safety and is manageable for the DNR.

After the buoys were removed, the Republican senator said he received more than a dozen calls from constituents. DNR officials initially told them they could have their buoys back, but they would be fined when they picked them up.

It was atypically unprofessional for the state agency and smacked of retribution, the Republican senator said.

The DNR has since backed off that position.

Of the 50 confiscated buoys, three have been reclaimed by residents, said Pritcher. On a screen behind him was a photo of buoys jammed together in a trailer, looking heavy and useless.

Pritcher twice tried to organize a return of the remainder during the meeting, asking who might want a return. Twice he was greeted with no takers.



PROVIDED

Privately owned Lake Keowee buoys have been confiscated by the Department of Natural Resources.