Upstate residents head to the lakes

Safety concerns grow with crowd on waters; boating deaths already top last year's total

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ANDERSON — Gas prices are up, the economy is down and Lake Hartwell's been relatively quiet, something that fishing guide Buster Green of Piedmont expects will change this weekend as Memorial Day crowds converge on Upstate lakes.

"It's gonna be a circus," said Green, who had just dropped off some fishermen and their catch of about 30 fish at Portman Marina on Lake Hartwell. They were out for three hours, and Green said he saw only about 10 other boats on the lake.

"Saturday, Sunday and Monday, multiply that by 1,000," Green said. "People have stayed home because of the economy and the price of gas, but they'll bust this weekend wide open. Hopefully, everyone will stay safe."

Crowded waters can be rough. "People don't really watch what they're doing, where they're going," Green said.

It's like a "washing machine" with waves coming from every direction, and people stand their boats up on end to keep the waves from "beating them to death," which makes the waves worse.

"One little wrong move, and the steering wheel can jerk out of your hands."

And, he said, there is the "alcohol effect."

Fifteen people have died on South Carolina waterways this year compared with 11 in all of 2009, according to the state Department of Natural Resources, which will offer courtesy boat safety inspections and have officers on patrol over the holiday weekend.

"We want to do everything we can to encourage boaters to wear life vests and to understand that boating under the influence can have the same deadly consequences as it does behind the wheel of a vehicle on the road," said Col. Alvin Taylor, who heads law enforcement at DNR.

DNR encourages all boaters to use a designated driver. On the water, the effects of alcohol or drugs are magnified by the elements of sun, wind and wave action. Alcohol impairs coordination of arm and leg movements, slows response to emergency situations and makes it difficult for boat operators to scan the horizon.

In South Carolina, any person involved in an accident that causes a death or serious injury faces an implied consent alcohol test, and conviction carries penalties up to 25 years imprisonment and a $25,000 fine.

Officers will be looking for boaters operating in a reckless manner, including speeding and driving while intoxicated, and not wearing personal flotation devices, Taylor said.

About 90 percent of people who drown aren't wearing life jackets, said Jim Rudy, public affairs officer for Flotilla 25, the U.S. Coast

See LAKES on page 5B

Holiday launches summer season



PAUL BROWN

Buster Green, who lives in Piedmont, has been fishing on Lake Hartwell for more than 30 years. He and others expect Upstate lakes will be crowded during this Memorial Day holiday.

LAKES

FROM PAGE 1B

Guard Auxiliary group in the Upstate.

"I just got off the water right now. I was at Lake Jocassee, and from time that I got in that boat to take it off the trailer to the time I drove it on the trailer, I had my life jacket on," Rudy said. "You never know when something's going to happen."

Wear a life jacket and let someone know your plans — what lake, what ramp and about when you expect to get home, Rudy said.

Coast Guard Auxiliary volunteers will be on safety patrol at lakes Keowee and Hartwell this weekend, Rudy said. They also will maintain a radio watch to assist boaters who may be in distress or otherwise need assistance and will offer random safety checks.

The auxiliary will offer a four-week boating safety class beginning June 3 from 7 p.m. until 9 p.m. at the Anderson County Library at 300 N. McDuffie St. in Anderson. Subsequent sessions are June 10, June 24 and July 1.

The cost is $30 per person and $15 for each additional family member. Completing the course qualifies boat owners for a 10 percent reduction on their boating insurance. To register, call Tony Quesada at 864-226-8546 or cell 561-289-6177 or Jim Rudy at 864-972-2085.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also is gearing up for a busy holiday weekend and summer season on its three Upstate lakes, Hartwell, Thurmond and Russell, and the fatalities so far this year worry Ryan Hartwig, natural resources program manager for the Savannah District.

Three people drowned in the Corps' Savannah River lakes in 2009. "The 2010 count is already at five, and the high season for recreation hasn't even started," Hartwig said.

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