



Oconee County emergency management director Scott Krein, right, patrols Lake Keowee with county firefighter Joseph Dempsey this week. Krein urged a combination of safety and fun for all those on boats or in the lake this weekend.

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# Officials emphasize safety, fun on lakes

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SENECA — Memorial Day marks the unofficial beginning of summer, which means more people in Oconee and Pickens counties are expected to be out on boats enjoying lakes Keowee, Jocassee and Hartwell.

On a county patrol boat on Lake Keowee this week, two Oconee officials said their team will be out patrolling to deal with any problems that come up on the lakes. While they want people to enjoy their time on boats, the patrols are on the lakes to make sure boaters are being safe at the same time.

“We’re patrolling for safety operations, and we don’t have a setting of writing tickets because we’re here to help make people safer,” Oconee County emergency management director Scott Krein said. “We require all of our employees and anyone on our boat to have a life vest on. You just never know what is going to happen, so making sure vests are ready is important, because in an emergency, people need to know how to put a life vest on.”

Krein has worked with the county since 2007. Joseph Dempsey, who is approaching his first anniversary as a county firefighter, said boat accidents happen for various reasons.

“I’ve seen a lot of reports of boating accidents (because of) being too close to each other and a lot of people who are unfamiliar with the area and the weather’s impact on the current in my almost year of

being here,” Dempsey said. “In the warmer weather, we try to get out in shifts to refamiliarize ourselves with the boats. A lot of our staff are dive certified, and a couple are still going through dive certification.”

Emergency responders do have equipment ready for quick-entry dives of up to 35 feet during patrols.

Krein said boaters should pay attention to their surroundings to avoid a crash with another boat and coming up on shallow parts of the lake.

“People will go too fast when they should be slowing down, and people getting thrown around in the boat and injuries happen,” he said. “Generally, (problems are caused by) people traveling too close to other boats and not getting the appropriate distance. There are slower areas here, and I can almost guarantee a boat will run aground this weekend.”

Joe Mracna of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary District 7 Flotilla 25 participates in patrols of Lake Hartwell and was part of a recent proclamation from Oconee County Council and Seneca City Council recognizing the importance of safe boating.

“My message for this weekend is anyone can go buy a boat and get on the water, because they don’t have to be licensed, so there’s no training whatsoever,” Mracna said. “You’ll see people out there that know the rules of the road and many more people that don’t. Defensive driving in a boat is important, because it’s going to be congested and people will be pulling stuff behind their

boat. We are just trying to raise awareness this week, because it’s mainly the kickoff of summer.”

Having a fire extinguisher, a proper number of life jackets on board and a throwable flotation device are all required for boats in South Carolina, according to Mracna.

Alcohol will be readily available on the holiday weekend, and Krein said moderation is important for all in being responsible on the water. The sheriff’s office and emergency responders will be on hand at Fall Creek Landing to monitor activity and respond quickly to incidents on or in the lake.

“We want to make sure people know alcohol and water don’t mix, because it dulls your senses,” he said. “We recommend everyone to do everything in moderation. Too much sun can get you sunburnt, so have moderation in what you do and enjoy the lake, not make an emergency out of the lake.”

In Pickens County, Mile Creek Park in Six Mile is set to become the first park in the county to have a life jacket loaner station.

Officials from Prisma Health, Mile Creek Park and boating safety nonprofit Sea Tow Foundation have teamed up to open the life jacket loaner station, which will hold life jackets that boaters can borrow and use free of charge. Life jackets will be available in sizes ranging from infant to extra-large adult. The station is located near the boat docks at Mile Creek Park. The park is located at 757 Keowee Baptist Church Road in Six Mile.