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Setting new records

Fall Creek marks full year with no drownings

BY CAITLIN HERRINGTON
THE JOURNAL

SALEM — After a record-setting number of drownings in 2019, today marks 365 days since the last person died in the water at Lake Keowee's Fall Creek Landing.

With the last hoorah of summer right around the corner, the question of whether the deterrents installed last fall are working seems, so far, to be a resounding "yes."

Three people died in the



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Above: Oconee County Sheriff's Office Cpl. Kyle Edwards looks over a section of Fall Creek Landing that leads to "jumping off rock." Despite being fenced off from pedestrian traffic, Edwards said many still climb over, around or under the fence to hang out at the ever-popular spot on Lake Keowee. **Left:** The addition of a chain-link fence and rip-rap on a popular peninsula at the landing in Salem has limited pedestrian access to "jumping off rock," a destination officials have called "an attractive nuisance." The site saw 20 drownings in 26 years, and today marks one full year since the last victim died.

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FALL CREEK: 'I hope we never have another drowning there'

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waters around Fall Creek Landing and nearby "jumping off rock" in 2019, the most in any year since Oconee County Coroner Karl Addis began keeping records in 1993. Interim county fire chief Scott Krein said emergency responders hadn't responded to any drowning calls there in 2020, despite it being one of the busiest summers in memory.

"Even though some people see the fence as a joke, from what I've been told, at least it's notification of the issues that have happened out there," Oconee County Council chairman Julian Davis said. "At least it puts the thought in somebody's mind that, 'I may be entering a dangerous situation and need to be more cautious.' I think that's what we're seeing — people are being more cautious."

The fence and rip-rap went up along the peninsula at Fall Creek Landing starting in late October to help limit pedestrian access, but the effectiveness couldn't be gauged until the weather warmed up.

With the COVID-19 pandemic giving people a bit more free time to enjoy the great outdoors, Duke Energy has seen more usage of its lake access points across the Carolinas — but the multi-agency effort to save lives has had positive results so far.

The landing is "still busy and overloaded," Krein said, and some visitors still climb over and around the fence in order to access "jumping off rock."

"Though we can't prevent people from accessing the peninsula or the jumping off rock from boats, it's certainly

restricted pedestrian access," Duke Energy spokeswoman Kim Crawford said. "We're still coordinating with the Oconee County sheriff for extra patrolling in the area on weekends and holidays. So far, we're real, real pleased with how it's working out."

The 12 months with no deaths at the site might be solely due to the long talked-about efforts at Fall Creek, but it could be a combination of factors, county administrator Amanda Brock said. Only time will tell, and Labor Day weekend may be the most telling of all.

"It's been no secret of how many drownings have happened at Fall Creek," Brock said Monday. "People have heard about them in the past, (and) hopefully they've been more careful and more aware of the situation here. That fence must be working to some extent, but a fence alone doesn't deserve all the credit. A lot of people put a lot of work into this project."

Fall Creek Landing in Salem is one of the first public access points on the northern end of Lake Keowee and saw 20 drownings in 26 years. Council had discussed potential ways to deter visitors from traveling to "jumping off rock," a popular island adjacent to the landing, for years, and finally got traction in its efforts last year.

"I'm not sure if it's because we're in the face of a pandemic and everyone's mental and physical health is on the forefront of our minds, or if it's just that every measure that's been put in place in a team effort of Oconee County, Duke Energy, the sheriff's office and, of course, the citizens is

finally working," Brock said. "But something is working."

Duke Energy, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, emergency officials and county officials worked together last summer to formulate a plan to help prevent future drownings at the site, Crawford said in a 2019 news release.

"It definitely has not eliminated people being out there, but at least maybe it has thrown up a larger caution sign than what's been out there," Davis told The Journal. "I think the biggest thing was identifying what the true problems were, then working with all the parties to come up with a solution. Honestly, one death is way too many. I hope we never have another drowning there."

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