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Some fear more accidents as Oakland ends marine patrols

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The Detroit News

Waterford Township -- The Oakland County sheriff's decision to end seasonal marine patrols of the county's 450 lakes does not sit well with boaters or marina operators, some of whom fear tragic consequences.

The sheriff's patrols -- which have helped keep the lakes safe since 1958 -- are being discontinued because \$13.3 million has been cut from Sheriff Michael Bouchard's \$130 million departmental budget. Overall, 127 positions have been trimmed, including two helicopter pilots.

The sheriff's dive team will remain, and marine deputies will respond to on-water accidents. Communities also can pay for patrols themselves.

"We budget between \$1.2 million and \$1.3 million a year for marine enforcement but get only \$240,000 a year from the state from boat registration fees -- even though we have more (registrations) than any other county," said Oakland County Undersheriff Michael McCabe.

"These (cuts) had to be made where they would affect the least amount of people in the county."

The marine division had four full-time deputies, a sergeant and 50 part-time deputies in 2009. This year, its ranks have been reduced to one sergeant and 20 part-timers, including retired marine or road patrol deputies.

Boaters say they worry the lack of patrols will cause problems.

"Boaters who are unruly and rowdy won't have anyone to stop them," said Chris Imber, a boater from Clarkston. "I expect it for smaller lakes, which don't have problems, it won't make much of a difference. But for larger ones, it will."

Kirk McCann, manager of the Island Cove Marina on Cass Lake, called the move "bad news for everyone."

"Everybody wants to have fun, but some people seem to lose their minds once they get on the water and either don't know the rules or decide they aren't for them," he said. "I can't tell you how many near-crashes there are on any day. And the drinkers make it worse."

In Macomb County, cuts aren't a concern since the Sheriff's Office marine patrol is staffed primarily with unpaid volunteers.

Macomb County Sheriff Mark Hackel said four staffers are paid to patrol about 30 1/2 miles of shoreline of Lake St. Clair. The other 120 reserve deputies volunteer. Hackel estimates the unpaid force saves county taxpayers at least \$500,000 a year.

"Volunteers get paid nothing to do what they do," Hackel said. "I am fortunate that these people are willing to do

what they do."

Some Oakland communities are considering chipping in to pay for patrols themselves. Communities can contract with the Sheriff's Office for about \$32 an hour.

To date, contracts are pending on Lakeville Lake in Addison Township, Lake Orion and Lake Voorhees in Orion Township, and Wolverine Lake in the village of Wolverine Lake.

Some communities that have expressed interest in contracting for services include those surrounding Cass Lake, Orchard Lake, Sylvan Lake, Walnut Lake and Pine Lake. Cass Lake, which normally has two patrol boats on weekends, is bordered by West Bloomfield Township, Waterford Township, Orchard Lake and Keego Harbor.

State Rep. Eileen Kowall, R-White Lake Township, is working on two bills that could increase state support for marine patrols. That could take time, she said.

"In theory, counties are supposed to get about 49 percent in boat registration fees back for patrols and boater safety," Kowall said.

"But what we've been getting is about half that."

Meanwhile, boats -- from kayaks and rowboats to personal watercraft and high-powered speedboats -- are starting to appear on the county's lakes. Oakland County has more than 85,000 boat registrations, the most in the state.

"It's so busy on Cass Lake where I live that I won't even go out on the water," said Rob Davis, owner of Club Royale Marina on Elizabeth Lake. "You better have some patrols out there or there could be some real problems. It would surprise me if you don't have problems."

On summer weekends and holidays, boating traffic can be hectic, statistics show. Last year, there were five reported drownings and 15 watercraft accidents -- four involving injuries on county lakes. Some believe without the regular presence of marine deputies, those numbers would have been higher.

"When I first started back in the '70s, we could expect to have a drowning almost every week -- we just didn't know where," said Jim Barriger, a marine deputy for 38 years.

"I like to think we have had a hand in (reducing) them with our presence and also our boater safety classes."

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Additional Facts

Oakland lake statistics

In 2009 there were:

- 5 drownings
- 3 near-drownings
- 0 fatal boat injuries
- 4 injuries
- 15 property damage incidents
- 1 water accident
- 98 search/rescue hours
- 440 marine violations
- 5 marine arrests
- 9,777 lake patrol hours
- 5,868 boater safety students

- 5,577 students certified

Source: Oakland County Sheriff's Marine Division

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