

Lake Tahoe patrols prepared for more boaters



Les Lovell with El Dorado County Sheriff's Department cites personal watercraft riders who were allegedly speeding in Emerald Bay. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

CAMP RICHARDSON – The drought may be good and bad news for Lake Tahoe.

Many reservoirs in California and Nevada are well below normal levels. Folsom Lake slip owners have until today to remove their boats because of the rapidly declining water level. Lahontan and Rye Patch reservoirs' boat launches in Nevada are closed.

All of those boaters and other could be headed for Lake Tahoe.

But Tahoe marinas are also affected by the lack of water. The runoff is at a trickle. Sand Harbor marina officials say launches could stop mid-summer. Meeks Bay recently dredged. Even so, they could only go to the bulkhead.



Emerald Bay presents the most problems for boat patrollers, especially on July 4 when hundreds of vessels are there.

El Dorado County Sheriff's Department's marine vessel could not maneuver into that West Shore marina on June 27 without risking damaging the prop. The boat was kicking up sand before it reached the buoy near the entrance.

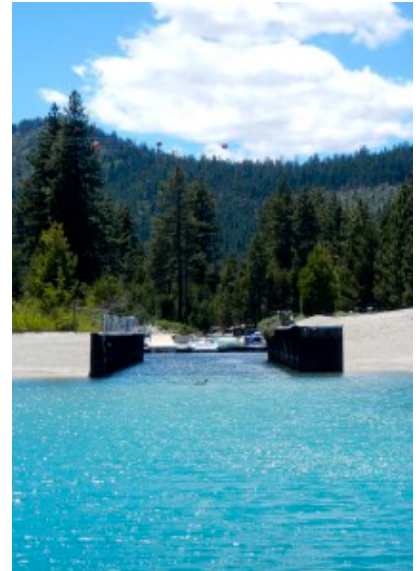
Getting gas at Camp Richardson was a bit precarious on Friday, too. Kahl Eidam had to carefully maneuver the 27-foot Almar to the dock. A dockhand said Bob Hassett, who operates the marina, is going to get a longer hose so it stretches farther down the dock where vessels are waiting in deeper water.

(Eidam, a former sergeant with the California Highway Patrol, is in his first year with the sheriff's boat patrol.)

The sheriff's boat is operating out of Camp Rich right now after being at Tahoe Keys Marina for 20 years. A long-term lease with Tahoe Keys is being negotiated.

Marinas throughout Tahoe could be affected by the declining water level.

"I don't know how they are going to get some of the bigger boats out in the future," Les Lovell said of vessels at Tahoe Keys because of the shallow water.



Meeks Bay Marina was dredged this season, but the approach was not.

Lovell, a former lieutenant at the department who has been on boat patrol for three years, said he expects there to be more issues this season because of the lower water level and potential for more boaters at Tahoe because of the lack of water elsewhere.

“Because of the low water level this year there will be a lot of crashes into rocks. You can’t mark them all,” Lovell told *Lake Tahoe News*.

He is also fearful people will run into sandbars during Fourth of July. This is always a precarious evening for people returning to marinas. Many have been drinking and all are ready to be home by the time the fireworks are over.

Hitting a sandbar usually means instantly stopping and often people are thrown overboard.

Lovell said his biggest worry is near Cove East before the Tahoe Keys Marina where the water level is so shallow and the long sand bar is not marked.

South Lake Tahoe officials are also worried about the water level.

“A concern for this year is the shallowness of the water. There is a concern of boaters literally getting stuck in the shallow waters this year,” Tracy Franklin, spokeswoman for the city, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

She said off Regan Beach the depth is 2½ feet quite a ways from shore.

Emerald Bay is El Dorado County’s biggest spot to patrol. While there were about a dozen incidents last season, some including people being thrown from their vessel, there were no major injuries. Property damage was the big issue because of the rocks.

A rock garden of sorts is protruding on the right side of the entrance to Emerald Bay. This might be better than last year when the shallow rocks weren’t visible.

Not far from D.L. Bliss State Park is a tree that is about 50-feet down. About a foot of it is now above the surface. A buoy that looks like an old balloon is attached to it to warn boaters. Still, the boat guys predict boaters or those on personal water craft will run into it.

The dropping water level will keep exposing rocks and trees – thus becoming a hazard. Not all will be marked.

Jumping off rocks is also an issue. There’s a group near Rooster Rock along the Rubicon hiking trail taking pictures. But this is where many opt to do bit a jumping off into Lake Tahoe. California State Parks, which owns the land, has made this a big no-no. The boat patrollers have the authority to cite them.



A tree stump is one of many obstacles in the way of boaters on Lake Tahoe.

While it's OK to operate a boat with alcohol in hand, it's not OK to be inebriated. The same 0.08 blood alcohol level while driving a car applies to a boat.

Most of the agencies at Lake Tahoe with boat patrols are participating in Operation Dry Water, a three-day enhanced boating under the influence program that ends today. Besides getting drunken boaters off the lake, it is also an opportunity to educate people.

Education is a large part of what the boat patrolmen do.

On Friday, the boat guys were talking to people about their speed in Emerald Bay. It's a 15 mph zone. Around a buoy field – like near the boat-in campground – it's a maximum of 5 mph within 200 feet.

On this day it's tourists who are contacted. Some are in rental boats. A clue to a rental vessel is if the registration ends in LE.

Lovell is quick to spot boats with outdated registration. When

they prove they have their paperwork, they are given a warning. But citations may be issued. And if they are drunk, they are going to jail.

But it's not just the water these guys patrol. They also can and do patrol the beaches.

The U.S. Coast Guard, which operates out of the North Shore, may board any vessel. All other law enforcement on the lake must have probable cause to stop someone.

Registration is a biggie with motorboats, while lifejackets is an issue with others. Anyone using a paddle needs to have a lifejacket that fits him or her. If the person is 14 or older, it's OK to have the jacket in or on the vessel.

But Lovell pointed out that a jacket attached to a standup paddleboard isn't going to help the person if they hit their head on the board or are in deep water. After all, the surface temperature of Lake Tahoe has not hit 60 degrees and hypothermia can then become factor.