



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Operation Dry Water Boating Patrols

**Location: DEM's Wickford Marine Base Facility
150 Fowler Street, North Kingstown**

Date: Friday, June 18, 2010

Looking forward to relaxing on the boat with that ice chest full of cold beer? Better think again. DEM environmental police officers from the Division of Law Enforcement and US Coast Guard Units from Castle Hill and Point Judith, as part of a national coordinated effort of stepped-up enforcement known as *Operation Dry Water*, will be out in force the weekend of June 25-27 looking for boat operators whose blood alcohol concentration exceeds the state limit of .08%.

The enforcement effort is aimed at reducing the number of alcohol-related accidents and fatalities, and fostering a stronger and more visible deterrent to alcohol use on the water. Coordinated by the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators working with the states, the US Coast Guard and other partner agencies, *Operation Dry Water* will increase the number of BUI patrols to collect and report BUI and safety compliance data. Rhode Island law sets limits and penalties for boating while intoxicated that are similar to the driving while intoxicated standards, and requires the same levels of testing.

BUI has become the leading contributing factor in fatal recreational boating accidents. Alcohol can impair a boater's judgment, balance, vision, and reaction time. It can increase fatigue and susceptibility to the effects of cold-water immersion. Sun, wind, noise, vibration, and motion – "stressors" common to the boating environment – intensify the side effects of alcohol, drugs, and some prescription medications. United States Coast Guard statistics from 2008, the latest available, reveal that 17 percent of all boat accident fatalities were a direct result of alcohol or drug use.

Last summer, agencies and organizations from 46 states and 5 territories participated in the first ever Operation Dry Water weekend. Over that three-day weekend, 2,442 marine law enforcement officers made contact with 17,454 recreational vessels and issued 5,320 boating safety warnings, 283 BUI citations and 1,127 citations for other violations. **In Rhode Island, this included 19 boardings, 3 written warnings and one arrest by DEM environmental police officers.**

This year, all 56 states, trusts and territories are expected to participate, searching for boat operators whose alcohol or drug impairment makes them a danger to other boaters.

Interview: Michael Stach, an Environmental Police Officer in DEM's Division of Law Enforcement, discussed the Operation Dry Water enforcement effort and an overview of safe boating laws and practices.

Other Safe Boating Reminders:

While boating is meant to be enjoyable, it has the potential to be extremely dangerous. DEM's Division of Law Enforcement, which patrols the state's waters 24 hours a day, reminds boaters to follow marine safety laws and regulations to help keep the water's safe to ensure an enjoyable boating experience this summer. The Division offers the following safety reminders:

- **Wear your life jacket or personal flotation device (PFD)**

State law requires US Coast Guard approved life jackets for the following:

- children under age 13 in any recreational vessel under 65 feet in length while underway in Rhode Island waters, unless below deck or in a closed cabin.
- anyone being towed behind a vessel on water skis, a surfboard, a tube or similar device
- everyone on a personal water craft (jet ski)

Although the laws apply to groups, life jackets are the most effective way to save boaters' lives, and DEM encourages **everyone** to wear them any time they are in a boat. Life jackets should be properly sized for the intended wearer.

- **Keep a close eye on the weather.**

Before setting out, pay close attention to marine weather forecasts. Take note of small boat cautionary statements, Small Craft Advisories, or Gale or Storm Warnings. While on the water, check NOAA Weather Radio for latest warnings and forecasts and watch for signs of approaching storms: dark, threatening clouds that may foretell a squall or thunderstorm, a steady increase in wind or sea lightning flashes.

- **Bring proper safety equipment**

Boaters are required to have the following safety equipment on board: properly fitted lifejacket for each person on board, a sound-producing device (horn or whistle), fire extinguisher, throwable device (ring), visual distress equipment (flares or pistol). Make sure safety equipment is easily accessible, and that you know how to use each piece of equipment. In time of an emergency, seconds count, and you don't want to be searching for safety equipment or reading instructions on how to use them at such a time.

- **Complete a Boating Education Course** (or make sure the boat operator has)

Most reported incidents in 2006 involved operator-controllable factors. The primary causes of incidents were carelessness or recklessness, operator inattention, operator inexperience, and unsafe speeds. Boating education courses teach the regulatory and statutory rules ("Rules of the Road") for the safe operation and navigation of recreational boats. Boater education courses are now mandatory for all Rhode Island boaters born after January 1, 1986 who operate a boat with a motor greater than 10 horsepower, and for all operators, regardless of age, of personal watercraft.