

Chain O'Lakes and upper Fox River open for no-wake boating; lower river still closed



Boaters ride on the Chain O'Lakes in May 2015. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

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County and state officials are working hard to have everything ready for boaters in anticipation that at least the Chain O'Lakes and upper Fox River will be open for regular boating by this weekend, but official word still is not expected until Thursday.

The flooding that struck in mid-July put a damper on what area businesses thought was going to be a very good boating season after a slow start in the spring because of weather.

Now that waters have receded enough for no-wake boating on the Chain O'Lakes and Fox River as of Wednesday morning, Joseph Keller, executive director of the Fox Waterway Agency, said people can be divided into two camps.

For one, there are those ready to get back to regular boating so they can make up for the lost weeks of no boating. Then there are others, mainly homeowners, who want the no-wake restriction to stay put until after

the weekend so they are not affected by wave action, and the shorelines have more time to dry out.

"It's been a real mixed bag," Keller said. "We're pushing to get things ready before the weekend so we can give people time on the lakes."

That means hauling debris out of the waterway, like trees that were stacked at the FWA offices in Fox Lake; removing several bogs that have caused problems, including one that blocked Squaw Creek in Fox Lake after it drifted into a bridge; and finding or replacing and installing the hundreds of navigation buoys that disappeared in the flood or floated out of place.

Keller said the decision on opening the lakes is expected to be made by Thursday afternoon.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources controls when the lakes and river are open, and the IDNR approved no-wake boating as of 9 a.m. Wednesday for Zone B, which includes the upper river north of Pistakee Lake and the Stratton Lock and Dam, and Zone C, which includes all 15 lakes that make up the Chain O'Lakes, according to the Fox Waterway website.

Zone A, which includes the lower river from Stratton Lock and Dam to Algonquin, remained closed, and there is a debris warning for all areas. The Lake County Sheriff's Marine Unit will be enforcing the no-wake boating along with the IDNR conservation police.

John Hartl, who has been running the C.J. Smith Resort on Grass Lake Road with his wife, Melanie, for 33 years, was cleaning their bait shop Wednesday with the intention of being open on Friday.

He thinks the no-wake restriction should be extended through the weekend.

"It's still a little high," he said, adding that he found out about Wednesday's no-wake announcement, "when I heard a pontoon boat going down the channel this morning." Once he checked his cellphone, people had texted him the news posted on the waterway agency's website.

"I think it's still too early for open boating," said Melanie, whose family started the resort in 1929. "The shorelines need to dry out, and the boats still create waves."

But they are also business people, offering boat rentals, cabin lodging, and shoreline fishing and a bait shop at 25315 W. Grass Lake Road. The property is technically on Spring Lake, the Chain O'Lakes smallest lake, which most people think is a channel.

"Now if we don't get any rain, it might be a good call. You do have to have an optimistic attitude," Hartl said. He added that no-wake can be a good time for fishing and that the canoers and kayakers can really enjoy the waterway without speedboat wakes.

"You can't ask for a better time than right now," he said.

Meanwhile, the Lake County Health Department tested the waters at 15 licensed beaches on the Chain O'Lakes for the presence of E. coli and all the test results showed bacteria levels were below the unsafe range.

The department is still urging residents to be cautious because of hazards like sunken debris and the beach sampling is not necessarily representative of the entire lakes system. Other sources of pollution like failed septic tanks could make some areas unsafe.

Since flooding in mid-July, the Fox Chain O'Lakes has been closed to boating and recreational swimming was not advised. As waters receded, the Lake County Health Department tested the 15 licensed swimming beaches around the Chain for the presence of E. coli bacteria. All test results indicated that E. coli levels were below the unsafe range.

While conditions have improved, the health department is still urging residents to be cautious about swimming in recently flooded lakes, as floating or sunken debris may be hazardous. In addition, the beach sampling is not necessarily representative of the entire lake system. Other sources of pollution may still be present, such as failing septic systems. Residents can test their own lake water by picking up a bottle from the Health Department Lab at 500 W. Winchester Road, Libertyville. The cost is \$18 per sample.