
River hoax gives idea to Coast Guard

Published: 5/14/07

Section:

Page: B1

By: Andrew Sirocchi

Herald staff writer

It was April 14 when the U.S. Coast Guard in Portland received a distress call claiming three people were on a 30-foot boat that was taking on water near McNary Dam.

In moments, six rescue boats from various regional agencies were sent to search a 25-mile stretch of the Columbia River, scouring the water and shoreline from McNary Dam to Sacajawea State Park. A MedStar helicopter took the air and tried to spot the boaters from above.

Three hours later, the search was called off and officials confirmed what they already believed — the call was a hoax.

“We get about a half-dozen of those per year,” said Senior Chief Jim Madsen, officer in charge of the Kennewick Coast Guard station on Clover Island in Kennewick. “Enough to get us frustrated.”

At \$1,550 per hour each time the Coast Guard launches its 23-foot rescue boat, frustration is understandable.

But now, Madsen hopes to call on volunteers who live along the Columbia River to help the Coast Guard and other agencies reduce their responses to hoaxes. If successful, the Citizens Action Network program could help district officials in Portland make better decisions about when to dispatch rescue teams and in turn, save money as well as lives.

“It’s not just the direct cost,” said John Umbarger, spokesman for the Coast Guard Auxiliary. “What happens at night, when a (navigation) aide is out and a tug goes down the river and hits a bridge? There’s the cost to infrastructure.”

The program relies on volunteers who live along the shoreline to keep a watchful eye on the waters. When a potential disaster occurs — whether a flashing light stops flashing or a vessel runs aground — the Coast Guard will call up a computerized map listing the volunteers who live in the area and officials will telephone them to determine if a problem really exists.

The information the volunteers provide gives officials who have to decide whether to send out a rescue operation more information to use in their decision-making.

For Madsen’s team — which includes nine Coast Guard members and 20 auxiliary volunteers who cover 550 miles of river stretching from The Dalles, Ore., to Richland on the Columbia and from the confluence of the Snake River to Lewiston, Idaho — the more eyes on the water the better.

The team is responsible for territory stretching across four states, including Lake Roosevelt, the Spokane River Arm and Fort Peck Lake in Montana.

“Anybody who has a river view and is willing to participate is a good resource,” Madsen said.

Those who choose to join the network shouldn’t expect anything more than a pat on the back as reward.

The network operates without a budget and has no money to compensate volunteers.

“It’s like volunteering for dive and rescue,” Umbarger said. “Saving a life — that’s the reward you get.”

In 2006, the program received the Award of Excellence by the Department of Homeland Security and based on past successes, the Coast Guard plans on taking the network national.

In the Seattle area, where the program got its start in 1999 under the name Eyes on the Sound, the network has attracted more than 260 volunteers.

Local Coast Guard officials don't expect any trouble getting Mid-Columbians to volunteer either. The program is open to anyone who has access to a telephone and a marine view from their home.

Umbarger said the local district could have a network up and running within two months.

Mark Blotz, general manager of the Clover Island Inn, said he only just heard of the program but his interest has been piqued.

"I really want the hotel to be a part of that and we will be filling out the application," Blotz said.

w Andrew Sirocchi: 582-1521; asirocchi@tricityherald.com