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Weapons of Marine Destruction

The Battle over W.E.D.s on the Willamette comes to the state Marine Board next week.

BY LILLIAN HOGAN



Wake Up: Willamette Riverfront property owners want regulators to do something about large synthetic wakes.

IMAGE: sean dreilinger / durak.org

Residents of small Willamette River communities 20 miles south of Portland say they've identified weapons of marine destruction that have accelerated erosion, damaging both their properties and salmon habitats.

The WMDs are actually WEDs, or wake enhancement devices, that can pump up to 2,000 pounds of water to generate waves up to 3 feet high for wakeboarders.

"The advent of this kind of boat and its impact on the upper Willamette is an ecological disaster," says Larry Michel, a Wilsonville riverfront homeowner.

In 2004, Michel lost a 36-foot-long, 32-foot-wide and 4-foot-deep section of riverbank to erosion. A fix was appraised at \$42,000. Instead, Michel spent 80 hours and \$1,125 on a DIY job involving a backhoe, plants and netting that he says will stall erosion for four years at best.

Fellow riverfront homeowner Mike McGuire traces increased erosion to 2000, about the time WEDs began to appear. Since then, about 50 homeowners from Wilsonville, West Linn and Aurora have complained to the Oregon State Marine Board about damage to their properties as well as to the river's ecosystem. They say salmon suffer because wake-caused erosion increases silt, which in turn increases water temperature.

Instead of banning WEDs, as many

homeowners would like, the marine board has sought to educate wakeboard boat operators to use the middle of the Willamette instead of hugging the shoreline. Michel says that request isn't realistic, with four boats going each way on a narrow, 500-foot-wide strip of river.

On March 6, the board has scheduled a demonstration in the Newberg Pool that may lead to new regulations. The demo will test how wakeboarding boats with—and without—WEDs generate wakes and how far the wakes travel. Landowners claim wakes don't dissipate much

as they travel across the channel. And wakeboarders claim only the wake shape is changed by WEDs.

Randy Henry, the board's operations policy analyst, says large boat wakes do contribute to undercutting banks, but thinks "there are other forces at play," such as land development.

While some homeowners want a wakeboarding ban, Michel wants the board to limit wake sizes on the Willamette to 10 inches. That can be accomplished by turning off WEDs and limiting boat size to under 22 feet. These are the same regulations that privately governed Lake Oswego has adopted to curb erosion.

Homeowners are skeptical the board will take any strong regulatory action because two of the five board members have ties to the boating industry. Board member Deborah McQueen used to own a boat dealership and now is a sales representative for fishing products. Another board member, Trey Carskadon, does advertising and marketing work for Stevens Marine, a boat dealer in Tigard and Milwaukie.

Henry says the board is objective, noting the other three members include a retired biology teacher, a retired legislator and a former mayor.

And McQueen believes she can be unbiased, telling *WW*, "We have been gravely interested in resolving this problem."

McQueen says she will recuse herself from a decision if needed, though she adds, "All boats can make wake with very little effort, whether they have [WEDs] or not."

Travis Williams, executive director of environmental watchdog Willamette Riverkeeper, says the marine board has been fair so far. But while he says riverbank erosion happens naturally, the constant motion from high, stacked boat wakes is "not natural," leading over time to banks sloughing into the river at an accelerated rate.

Some wakeboarders say pushback by

homeowners is a typical generational divide, in this case between young boarders and old fogies.

"It may accelerate the damage that is already occurring, but I would say [the riverfront homeowners] probably dislike us more than just the erosion," says wakeboarder Ryan Barmore, 20.

Michel denies any bias. "Sure, their stereos in their boats are really loud and they're playing rap—there's f-this and f-that as they go by your house," Michel said. "But a social issue

doesn't erode banks and produce big wakes."

FACT: *The April 2007 issue of Wakeboarding magazine named the Willamette River as one of the top three waterways for wakeboarding.*

Originally Published on

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WAKE BOARDERS

Protect Your Sport, Play Away

The Oregon State Marine Board is urging wake-boat operators to “Play Away” in 2007.

With the incredible growth in the sport of wakeboarding, wake-related complaints have increased substantially in recent years, especially in the Newberg Pool of the lower Willamette River. Citizens have proposed regulations aimed at reducing wake complaints. Indeed, the Lake Oswego Corporation adopted its own wake regulation, prohibiting the use of wake enhancing devices on Lake Oswego.

What are the complaints? Wakeboard boats are large and heavy. Many have devices, including ballast tanks or fins that help maximize a wake. In addition, some operators will load the boat to near capacity with people to increase the wake even further.

On a lake, reservoir or large river like the Columbia, the wakes often go unnoticed. But on narrow stretches of the Willamette River between Portland and Newberg, the wakes strike docks, moorages, beaches and swim areas risking damage and injury.

Add to the fact that many wakeboard boats now come with high-powered stereos, and other river users and waterfront homeowners become desperate for relief. It is at this point they call the Oregon State Marine Board seeking restrictive regulations.

So what are the solutions to the problem?

Here is a summary:

Do nothing: It's public water, right? Recreational navigation is guaranteed, right? Yes, it's public water, but individual uses aren't guaranteed. The Marine Board or even the state legislature could respond with specific restrictions.

Do something: Proposals suggested to the Marine Board include anything from "no wake-enhancing devices" to "no towed devices" on narrow stretches of the river or stretches that are highly developed.

Do prevention: This is the best option. For this to work, boaters must recognize the need to "play away" from waterfront development and other people who do not appreciate large boat wakes. Boaters should reduce the volume of their stereo, pick up their litter, and be courteous to local residents and other waterway users.

Watch for increased law enforcement in 2007.

ORS 830.305 Unsafe operation. A person commits the crime of unsafe operation of a boat if the person operates a boat in a manner that endangers or would be likely to endanger any person or property. *Fine: Maximum \$499*

ORS 830.315 Reckless operation; speed. (1) A person commits the crime of reckless operation of a boat who operates a boat carelessly and heedlessly in willful or wanton disregard of the rights, safety or property of others. *Fine: Maximum \$6,250*



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