

State's new boating education initiative taken with Prudence

Inflatable DEP craft dispensing safety message along with goodies

By JUDY BENSON
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Old Lyme — This summer, if you're boating on one of the state's lakes, rivers or Long Island Sound, don't get nervous if you see "Prudence" approaching.

It doesn't mean you'll be getting a ticket for speeding in a no-wake zone, or traveling on the wrong side of the channel marker. Those on board the Prudence are just interested in a chat, and you might get a gift out of the encounter.

The 19-foot inflatable vessel, the newest in the state Department of Environmental Protection's fleet, is named for state heroine Prudence Crandall, and will be on waterways twice a week this summer promoting safe boating. It was paid for with a \$50,000 federal grant funded by boating

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Prudence is DEP safety messenger

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fuel and fishing gear taxes, said Eleanor Mariani, director of the DEP Boating Division. A DEP staffer will work with boating safety volunteers to man the boat from July 6 to Sept. 3, at different locations throughout the state.

At the DEP's Marine Headquarters Tuesday, Gov. M. Jodi Rell officially christened the vessel by whacking its side with a bottle of soda before an audience of television cameras and reporters, students from the Maritime Education Network summer program in Old Saybrook and local officials.

A split second later, it was floated into the waters of the Connecticut River off back of the trailer that had carried it to the launch at the DEP facility, with Mark Chanski, boating resource technician, holding fast to the line.

This wasn't the vessel's inaugural launch, however. DEP spokesman Dennis Schain said the boat was used on a limited basis last summer to test out the boater education initiative.

Eleanor Mariani, director of the DEP's boating safety division, said the vessel will

approach boaters on the water "very casually." DEP staff and volunteers will talk to them about the importance of wearing life preservers, not drinking while boating, general boating safety rules and conditions in the waterway that day. Mariani and other officials at the event wore new, compact life jackets that are intended to be more attractive to those who find older types restrictive and uncomfortable.

As a reward for listening to the safety advice, boaters will be given coupons from businesses and tourist attractions. Among participants in the promotion are the Mystic Aquarium & Institute for Exploration, North Cove Outfitters in Old Saybrook, SeaTow Eastern Connecticut, TowBoat US in Old Saybrook, Three Belles Marina in Niantic and Sea Sherpa Kayak, which operates in southeastern Connecticut. Chanski said the coupon giveaway was OK'd by the State Ethics Commission.

"When they're out on the water, people don't want to be bothered," he said. "But if you given them something, they're happy."

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Gov. M. Jodi Rell, foreground, christens and launches the Department of Environmental Protection's newest boater safety vessel, Prudence, Tuesday in a ceremony at DEP Marine Headquarters in Old Lyme.

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Through public outreach with "Prudence," Rell, Mariani and other speakers said, the state hopes to get more people to wear life jackets consistently and reduce boating accidents and fatalities. Rell cited statistics showing that 75 percent of fatal accidents happen when people fall out of their boats, and that most of the deaths would have been prevented if the boaters had been wearing life jackets. During Rell's remarks, a small open motor boat zipped by on the river behind the DEP pier where the ceremony took place, the operator standing up with his hand on the handle of the outboard motor on the stern

LOCAL VISITS BY PRUDENCE

July 17 at Port Niantic and fireworks in Niantic Bay

Aug. 21 in the Niantic River

Sept. 11-12 at Special Olympics in Stonington

Sept. 26 at Great Pachaug Canoe Race on Pachaug Pond

behind him. He was shirtless and wore no life jacket.

The state law requires children under 12 and those on personal watercraft to wear a life jacket at all times, "but we're trying to get everyone to wear their life jackets at all times, especially on small

boats 21 feet and under," Mariani said.

Rell also cited statistics showing that 63 percent of fatal boating accidents involved alcohol, and said part of the mission of "Prudence" will be to educate boaters about the dangers of boating while intoxicated, or BUI. The state recently increased penalties for BUI, and clarified the process for determining a boater's blood alcohol content, Rell noted.

"We've all heard of DUI, but BUI really has become a problem," Rell said.

Last weekend the DEP arrested four people for boating while intoxicated.

Mariani said no law en-

forcement will be done from the "Prudence." If the DEP staff and volunteers see behavior that could warrant an arrest, they will radio environmental conservation officers to come to the scene, she said.

"They'll call if there's a flagrant problem," she said. But the main purpose of the encounters between Prudence and boaters, she said, will be to educate and give the public a chance to ask questions. During the test runs last summer, DEP staff found people often took advantage of the chance to ask questions.

"It opens up the doors," she said.

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