

FISHERMEN WON'T LIKELY FACE PENALTY FOR RESCUE EFFORT

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OAK HARBOR, Ohio - The day after more than 100 ice fishermen were rescued from a floe in Lake Erie, a number of them were back yesterday, this time to retrieve the equipment they left behind.

For Charles Gottschalk, 64, that meant hiring an airboat to recover from the ice his four-wheeler, his fishing gear, and, of course, his walleye.

"I'd have laid \$1,000 on the beach before I went out [Saturday] that it wasn't going to break," the Perrysburg Township man said as he waited from the shore at Magee Marsh.

But break away it did. Authorities said a chunk measuring eight square miles started to float away on Saturday because of warm temperatures and strong winds. Fishermen who had gained access to the area earlier in the day by using a wooden plank to cross a crack in the ice were stranded when the crack widened.

Twenty-one agencies were involved in the rescue effort that ensued, and one fisherman, Leslie Love, 65, of New Albany, Ohio, lost his life when he died of natural causes, said the Erie County coroner, who learned from the man's family that he had a heart condition.

The price tag for the rescue operation, which involved airboats and helicopters, is not totaled yet. And while officers took names and information from fishermen they rescued Saturday, it was not with the intention of making them foot the bill or filing charges.

"We're not looking to send you a bill at this point. We're not looking to arrest you," Jerusalem Township Fire Chief Harold Stanton said.

Still, Ottawa County Sheriff Bob Bratton said the fishermen should have known better and there should be discussion about how to handle such situations in the future.

"I'm not against civil infractions and I'm not against criminal arrests if it proves to that," he said.

Ottawa County has a policy that takes personal information from ice fishermen who require rescue on the first infraction, asks them to attend a safety class the second time, and allows them to be cited on the third offense. It was not applicable Saturday because the county was only assisting the rescue.

Lucas County Sheriff James Telb said he's not opposed to the idea of a fine: "I think there should be some consequence. Maybe not the first time."

That said, he continued, "We rescue people everyday some place. That's our job. ... That's why [taxpayers] support us to do these things."

Several fishermen who were out salvaging their equipment were upset by the attitude of some officials that they acted negligently by fishing in the warm, windy weather.

At an estimated 16 inches, the ice was plenty thick, they said. The real problem, they claim, is that a ship came through the area unknown to them and cut a channel through the ice, making it possible for the floe to break off. A Coast Guard spokesman said, however, that there were no ice-cutting operations in the area.

"You make room for ice to move; ice moves," said Fred Jones, 35, of Tiffin.



Fishermen come off Lake Erie Saturday after being stranded on a floe (THE BLADE/LISA DUTTON)

Others said the rescue and media coverage made much more of the event than was warranted.

"They blew it way out of proportion," said Chris Chaney, 43, of Tiffin. "We were all safe out there. There was nobody in danger."

At the very least, law enforcement officials hope the lake rescue will serve as a warning to others.

"The reality of it is that ice out there is dangerous 24/7," said Chief Stanton. "The moment you think it's safe, you'll be one of our potential clients, unfortunately."

Those who take to the ice should remember to dress warmly and bring a GPS or flares to help authorities find them in case of a rescue.

Sheriff Telb also suggested that some sort of warning signs could be placed in the future at key entry points to the ice that fishermen use to let them know when conditions are unsafe.

"Hopefully from this experience, some good things will come from this," he said.

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