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Tow-boat service starts on Table Rock

The business is the first of its kind in the area.

By Karen E. Culp News-Leader Staff

It was warm and sunny when you decided to go fishing on Table Rock Lake this morning, but that ol' Missouri weather has turned on you again.

Now, a cold drizzle is coming down and you're calling it quits. But as you're heading back to the dock, you run out of fuel.

You look around for fellow anglers but realize everyone else was smart enough to stay home. What can you do?

Until this week, your choices would have been to get out the oars or use your cell phone to call a nearby marina or the Missouri Water Patrol for help.

Now, there's another option.

Sea Tow, a commercial boat-towing service, opened this week on Table Rock, which has seen boat traffic grow over the years.

The company, a national franchise, provides 24-hour assistance to stranded boats by either towing them to a safe place, bringing fuel, or removing water from the boat.

Though marinas and the state Water Patrol can help, providing towing services can sometimes stretch those agencies' resources. Sea Tow's only purpose is assisting boaters.

The company passed a rigorous set of qualifications to become a commercial boat-towing service.

"Any of us who have a boat could potentially have problems anytime we're out on the water," said Dwight McNeil, who owns the Table Rock Sea Tow franchise with his wife, Marcella.

Gary Haupt, captain with the Missouri Water Patrol's District Three, which includes Table Rock, said the patrol has been eager to have a service like Sea Tow.



With his wife, Marcella, Dwight McNeil drives his 185-horsepower boat on Table Rock Lake near Port of Kimberling Marina on Thursday. Steve J.P. Liang / News-Leader



McNeil's new company, Sea Tow, caters to boaters needing help. Steve J.P. Liang / News-Leader



Haupt

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"There's been nothing like it down here before," Haupt said. "Some of the marinas have been assisting boaters, but that, of course, detracts from their resources."

The Water Patrol will tow boaters who are out of gas or stalled, but the patrol doesn't really have the proper equipment for towing, Haupt said.

"We're always available to assist boaters," Haupt said.

"But we routinely get calls from boaters and we won't have an officer near them. Then we have to make the difficult decision, whether we can justify sending an officer 20 or 30 miles to help with a stalled boat."

The Water Patrol's primary function is law enforcement, and has nine officers dedicated to Table Rock, Haupt said.

"We're spread very thin," he said.

Certification not easy

Sea Tow has two boats and four captains. Both the company and its captains have gone through extensive training and certification programs.

"We've been kind of anxious to have someone with the proper qualifications," Haupt said.

Sea Tow's captains have to enroll in a random drug testing program and be certified in first aid and CPR, McNiel said. They had to pass physicals and vision tests from the U.S. Coast Guard and submit to an FBI investigation.

Once all of its captains were licensed, Sea Tow had to submit its operation plan to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for approval. The company also had to create an agreement with a local marina — in this case, the Port of Kimberling Marina.

McNiel said he grew up on the lake and has watched it change over the years. A longtime boater, McNiel owns a houseboat on Table Rock, where he has typically spent a great deal of his summers. A former Christian County sheriff, he also owns a private investigating firm, Midwest Intelligence Inc., which he will continue to operate.

The number of boats on Table Rock — and the size of those boats — has continued to increase year after year, McNiel said.

"This area is one of the fastest growing in the state and in the nation," McNiel said. "Fifteen or 20 years ago, a 45- or 50-foot boat was a huge boat on this lake. Now, boats cost well over \$1 million."

Sea Tow is able to tow any boat on the lake, McNiel said. Boaters can pay an annual fee of \$119 to Sea Tow, and that covers any boat registered in that boater's name. Sea Tow will tow those members' boats for free, but nonmembers pay \$120 an hour.

"We're basically AAA on the lake," McNiel said, referring to the highway roadside assistance company.

State Park Marina co-owner Pat Cox said he's happy to have Sea Tow's service.

"Our marina can give some assistance, if a boat needs help and is in our general vicinity," Cox said. "But we weren't always available 24 hours a day."

And even though State Park and other marinas can help, boaters may not know which marina to call when they're out on the lake.

"This is a welcome service," said Cox, treasurer of the Table Rock Lake Marina Association. His twin brother, Philip, is State Park Marina's other owner. "Both as a marina and as a marina association, we're happy to have this service."

Patrolling for business

Most calls for service will likely come to Sea Tow from a cell phone, McNiel said. Marinas can also contact Sea Tow on behalf of boaters, and other calls can come in via radio, he said.

Sea Tow's boats will also be out on patrol, looking for stranded boaters, especially during busy weekends.

Table Rock Lake will begin to see heavy boat traffic in a few weeks, as the weather warms. Once Memorial Day weekend comes around, Sea Tow expects to be busy. Haupt said calls for towing from Table Rock boaters are routine during the warm months.

"It's a regular occurrence when we get into the season. People run out of gas or have trouble," Haupt said.

And though the Water Patrol is "not in the business of soliciting business for this company," it will provide information about Sea Tow to its dispatchers and to the counties that contain parts of Table Rock.

Services like Sea Tow are already available on Lake of the Ozarks, McNiel said.

Though the company's first official day of operation — Thursday — looked pretty quiet, it won't be long before the lake is filled with activity. Sea Tow is ready.

"Busy weekends with high traffic, both boats will be out on the water on a 'round-the-clock basis," McNiel said.

Contact reporter Karen Culp at kculp@News-Leader.com.

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