

Coast Guard Orders Raft Race Moved Up River

By Tom Juergens

ESSEX - This town has seen its last Connecticut River Raft Race crowd now that Coast Guard officials have decided not to issue any permits for a race south of the East Haddam bridge.

There is "just too much recreational boating" from the bridge to the river's mouth, and the raft race has grown to such proportions that it has become too difficult to provide the necessary margin of safety for both spectators and participants," said Coast Guard Captain Roger Harkin, boating safety chief in New York City's Coast Guard District Command.

In response to recommendations from state police, the Department of Environmental Protection, and New London Coast Guard Lieutenant Commander William Conway, who was in charge of the Coast Guard operations for the past summer's race, the New York office set some new conditions for the race. The conditions were sent in a letter to race organizer Ken Fischburg of Norwich.

Fischburg said the race committee is already working on next year's race and should know in a couple of months exactly where it will be. Fischburg said the letter from the Coast Guard included a paragraph to the effect that "our intent is not to shut down the race but to keep it under control."

The race will have to end on the mainland, and the responsibility of towing any rafts will rest with the race committee instead of the Coast Guard. To protect rafters that dive and swim around the rafts after the race, motor propulsion of any raft will be prohibited. Finally, participants will still have to wear life jackets during the race.

The Department of Environmental Protection hasn't yet been approached for a new location for the end of the race, said Boating Enforcement Coordinator Randolph Dill. If and when the raft race committee does ask for a spot, his department will set conditions for security, raft removal, concessions, and a time when participants have to leave the spot.