

Wire clippers required for anglers trolling with downriggers on Great Lakes

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MADISON - Starting May 15, anglers trolling with downriggers on Wisconsin's Great Lakes waters must have wire clippers on board that can cut their downrigger cables should they get tangled in commercial fishing trap nets or other obstructions below the water's surface.

The requirement is part of an emergency rule adopted late last month by the state Natural Resources Board and aimed at better protecting sport anglers on Lake Michigan and Lake Superior from hazards under the water, including commercial fishing nets.

"This rule requires the boat operator to have wire clippers on board and easily accessible, which many anglers already do," says Conservation Warden Supervisor Chris Groth, who leads the Marine Enforcement Unit for the Department of Natural Resources.

"The most important thing anglers can do is steer clear of the nets and other obstructions," he says. "Having wire cutters on board is a small but important step anglers can take to protect themselves should they get into a bad situation on Lake Michigan or Lake Superior."

Cutting any cable or line that gets tangled in an underwater obstruction is the only safe way for a boater to get free. Backing, circling or other attempts to retrieve the snagged gear is extremely dangerous because a boat tethered or caught on a rock or other object on the bottom can be swamped and capsize.

In June 2010, a boat carrying three anglers who were trolling in Lake Michigan near Sheboygan capsized after their downrigger cables got tangled in a legally set trap net. While in the water, one of the anglers suffered a heart attack and died.

Bill Horns, the DNR's Great Lakes fisheries specialist, says that new measures commercial fishermen must take also will better protect sport anglers.

Nets on Lake Superior must be marked in the same way as nets on Lake Michigan, and nets set on both waters must have reflective tape on the staffs of the flags marking them.

Horns says that having consistent net markers on both lakes will help increase angler awareness of the nets, what to look for, and the potential dangers they pose. If anglers bring a strong light at night, the reflective tape will be easier to see and allow the operators to steer clear of the nets.

DNR and UW Sea Grant will be releasing revised informational materials in coming weeks showing the new markings and boundaries. More information on trap net safety can be found on DNR's web site at <http://dnr.wi.gov/fish/greatlakes/trapnets.htm>.