

\$25 sailing event fee runs into stiff winds

By PERRY BEEMAN • pbeeman@dmreg.com • June 13, 2010

Yacht owners from the Iowa Great Lakes and Clear Lake managed to at least temporarily block a new state fee they considered too stiff at \$25 a week.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources wants the money to help pay for a \$40,000 computer program that handles event permit applications. Organizers of events at lakes and parks - boat races, for example - would pay a \$25 permit fee for an event lasting up to a week. Some yacht clubs have weekly races and would pay the fee repeatedly.

The computer system lets visitors check what events are taking place each day at the parks and lakes around Iowa, said Jeff Kopaska, who supervises the program for the DNR. Iowans often ask about the events, some to avoid an area that may be too busy.

Sponsors of 527 fishing tournaments a year already pay the \$25 event fee. They didn't protest, Kopaska said.

But the sailing crowd made some big waves.

Phil Petersen, head judge for the Okoboji Yacht Club, said the five sailing clubs in Iowa, including one run by the University of Iowa, were taken by surprise. "They weren't aware of a \$25 fee, let alone a \$25-a-week fee," Petersen said.

The per-week fee would be equal to each of the Okoboji Yacht Club's 100 active sailors paying 25 cents. Petersen drove down from the lakes to fight the fee at a legislative committee meeting Tuesday. At current Des Moines gas prices, the driver of a car getting 25 miles per gallon would have spent about \$47 to drive from the lakes to Des Moines and back.

The drive paid off.

A panel of lawmakers, the Iowa Administrative Rules Review Committee, voted to delay action on the rule for 70 days.

Petersen told lawmakers that the DNR's public statements on the rule weren't clear. He said many boaters are offended at the added fee when they already pay other fees and taxes.

Petersen and his fellow sailors contended the resources department doesn't have the legal right to establish a new fee. Department lawyer Tamara Mullen said the agency has that power.

Mark Tesar of the Clear Lake Yacht Club said members of the 75-year-old organization pay for their boat registrations, and that should be enough. "It just seems a little unfair to all of a sudden start charging us a fee," Tesar said. "The dollar amount isn't a big issue. It's the principle. We pay our property taxes and income taxes."

Tesar told lawmakers he had been unable to change the DNR's course through negotiation.

Sen. James Seymour, a former sailor and a member of the rules panel, felt the yachters' financial pain.

"It's an expensive sport," said Seymour, a Woodbine Republican. "Boaters pay their taxes and registration and marina fees. They have to pay to put the boat in. They have to pay to take the boat out."

"It seems to me that this is an afterthought by the department, like, 'Hey, we could make some more money,'" Seymour said. "I think this is unfair."

Rep. Linda Upmeyer, a Garner Republican, also objected to the fee and welcomed added time for debate.

"It seems like this singles out a very specific group," Upmeyer said. "It is arrogant on our part to assume that people who sail are wealthy." Sen. Jack Kibbie, an Emmetsburg Democrat, suggested the 70-day