

# Wake surfing in spotlight at Lake Beulah

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## Outdoors

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**A wake surfer is towed behind a wake boat on a Wisconsin lake. PAUL A. SMITH**

As parties grapple over how or whether to regulate wake-enhanced boating in Wisconsin, the spotlight will focus March 29 on Lake Beulah in Walworth County.

The 812-acre lake with a maximum depth of 58 feet is very popular with wake surfers who live on the lake as well as those who live outside the area but trailer their boats and launch on Beulah. But while the clear-water lake has long been a magnet for fishing, sailing and boating, in recent years it has suffered damage from use of the newer, more powerful wake boats, according to local residents and members of Protect Lake Beulah, an East Troy-based conservation organization. Tom VanDenBogart, Protect Lake Beulah president, said the changes include scouring of the lake bottom, damage to aquatic vegetation and fish spawning habitat, increased shoreline erosion and increased suspension of bottom sediments.

And wake boating also has brought a marked uptick in conflicts with other lake users, VanDenBogart said.

As a result the organization is advocating for a local ordinance to prohibit wake-enhanced boating on Lake Beulah.

Such an action would require approval by the supervisors of the Town of East Troy.

As part of its efforts to gather support for an ordinance, the organization will hold a March 29 public meeting on 'how wake surfing is not suited' for the lake.

'We see ourselves as the voice of the lake,' VanDenBogart said of the organization. 'We think Lake Beulah will become the epicenter of the challenges of wake-enhanced boating to Wisconsin's lakes.'

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## **What is wake-enhanced boating and why is it controversial?**

Wake-enhanced boating involves use of a special power vessel with water- filled ballast tanks or other devices to increase its displacement and create large waves for surfers or tubers to ride. The waves are often 3 feet high and allow a surfer to follow a boat without a tow rope.

Statewide regulations allow the activity anywhere power boats are allowed above no-wake speeds.

Issues related to wake-enhanced boating have heated up in recent years in Wisconsin, involving environmentalists, wake surfers, anglers, lakefront property owners, elected officials, boating industry lobbyists and more. A statewide organization called Lakes At Stake Wisconsin formed in 2023 to work toward increased restrictions on the activity.

And a 'wake boat reform coalition' of Wisconsin-based groups in favor of added restrictions on wake-enhanced boating has 72 members as of this month.

However, boating industry groups, including the Water Sports Industry Association and National Marine Manufacturers Association, are lobbying to prevent changes that would reduce use of wake boats in the state.

And although most public meetings and surveys in Wisconsin are dominated by people in favor of added restrictions on wake-enhanced boating, no statewide action has been taken.

## **Municipalities have enacted local ordinances to control or ban wake-enhanced boating**

Left with no other option, Wisconsin residents have enacted 39 local ordinances to restrict or prohibit wake surfing, according to the Last Wilderness Alliance, a lake protection organization based in Presque Isle. The ordinances protect about 260 lakes.

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The most recent ordinance was passed March 12 in the Town of Chicog in Washburn County. It covers seven lakes.

Brian Fons would like to see Lake Beulah added to the list. Fons, who has lived on Lake Beulah since 1982 and runs its weekly bass fishing tournament, said the lake is really three basins connected by channels.

Each area has underwater structure, including bars and humps. The lake is also known for marl bottom in places.

The varied bottom features and depths make the lake particularly vulnerable to damage from the downward thrust of wake boats, Fons said.

A recent study on a lake in Connecticut found downward prop wash impacts as deep as 26 feet from a wake boat.

'When I started fishing this lake the cabbage weed beds were just legendary, lush and teeming with life,' Fons said. 'Now those are gone. We're definitely seeing the habitat in the lake decline.'

Fons collected underwater video in recent months showing underwater humps on Beulah with 'literally no weeds left,' he said.

Lacking any statewide action, the appetite for local restrictions on wake surfing keeps increasing, said Dan Butkus of Waunakee, president of the non-profit group Wisconsin Lakes.

Butkus and a coalition of groups would like to see the Department of Natural Resources modify its procedures to make it easier for local ordinances to be enacted.

### **Wake surfers opposed to ban seek 'balanced solution'**

However, wake surfers at Lake Beulah have pushed back and in January launched a petition on Change.org to oppose a ban on Lake Beulah.

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It calls for a 'balanced solution' to potentially include 'designated wake zones, time restrictions, or education programs for responsible boating (to) protect the lake while allowing all users to coexist.'

The petition, originated by Joel Klein, gathered 410 supporters as of March 19. Efforts to reach Klein for comments were unsuccessful.

But the measures suggested in the petition are consistent with statements and programs from the boating industry. As opposition to wake surfing has increased in recent years, industry officials and lobbyists have called on boaters to operate their crafts 'responsibly' and have lobbied against stiffer statewide regulations as well as local bans on wake-enhanced boating.

VanDenBogart is optimistic public support will grow for an ordinance to prohibit wake surfing on Beulah.

'This may be as tough an environment for it to pass as anywhere in the state,' he said. 'But it should absolutely allow the issues to come into focus and highlight what is at risk.'

The March 29 meeting is scheduled to run from 9 to 11 a.m. at the East Troy Intergenerational Community Center, Door #7, 2043 Division Street, East Troy. It will feature presentations on wakeenhanced boating and its impacts. It will be followed by a period to for the public to ask questions and provide comments. A remote option via Zoom also will be available. Visit [protectlakebeulah.org](https://protectlakebeulah.org) for more information.