The Sandusky Register

**U.S. Coast Guard protects local ice**

(6/6)

In January 2014 after ice formed between Catawba Point and South Bass Island, the company heading the downtown Put-in-Bay dock renovation project announced plans to cut a path through the ice to transport steel dock cribs to the island.  Many Put-in-Bay residents who cross between these points have long assumed that the South Passage was protected from ice-breaking activities, since this has long been used as an ice bridge whenever available.  However, it turned out that the rules in place at the time only required that the U.S. Coast Guard be given a 72-hour notification of the intent to break the ice.  Because of public outcry and negative media attention, the company planning the ice-breaking relented after several ice shanties were planted in their proposed pathway by some mainland ice guides.  Acting upon a resolution passed by the Coastal Resources Advisory Council of the ODNR, Office of Coastal Management (OCM), the Chief, Scudder Mackey pitched the idea to the U.S. Coast Guard to protect the Island area ice, in the interest of recreational user safety.  The Coast Guard has the authority to establish certain areas as Regulated Navigation Areas (RNA) and Limited Access Areas to control vessel traffic for reasons that can include, but are not limited to: channel obstructions, winter navigation, unusual weather conditions or unusual water levels.  In the May 22 Federal Register, the U.S. Coast Guard proposed changes to three existing RNA closure zones to redefine them as Safety Zones, including:

— The waters of Lake Huron known as South Channel.

— The waters of Lake Huron between Mackinac Island and St. Ignace, Mich.

— The waters of Lake Michigan known as Gray’s Reef Passage.

Safety zones are used when, “Vessel traffic would disrupt ice integrity in these areas and pose risks to these recreational waterway users, which may include people and vehicles falling through the ice.”

The U.S. Coast Guard has proposed two new safety zones on the Great Lakes, closed to navigational traffic, specifically:

— The waters of Lake Huron on Saginaw Bay, Mich.

— The waters of Lake Erie in the vicinity of the South Passage and Lake Erie Islands, Ohio.

The Coast Guard also proposed the addition of three new RNAs in the Great Lakes:

— Maumee Bay Entrance Channel from the Channel Light to Grassy Island. As many of us know, ship traffic going into the Port of Toledo has often caused unstable ice for fishermen using the ice off Anchor Point to Crane Creek.

— Connecting waters of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron known as the Straits of Mackinac.

— Waters of Lake Michigan known as Green Bay.

This is good news for the scores of ice fishermen, snowmobilers, skaters and cross-country skiers who have taken advantage of these winter recreational activities over the past two winters.  Ice fishing is experiencing an explosion of popularity, in part due to more widespread ownership of ATVs and snowmobiles and the evolution of superior portable ice shelters, electronics, tackle and power augers that let new ice anglers quickly gear up for this unique winter activity.  In addition, the proliferation of fishing forums, message boards and other internet sites can quickly inform readers of a hot bite occurring anywhere within striking distance of guys from all over North America.  As a result, tons of trophy walleyes were caught by local and non-resident anglers, who filled every available parking lot and access point to the ice. A trip through any of these parking lots provided clues of the distance that they travelled, with license plates representing at least a dozen states each of the past two winters.  Celebrating good ice the past two winters along with the anglers are merchants from Oregon to Port Clinton and beyond who have benefited from this bonanza of bonus offseason business. These include sporting goods, bait and tackle shops, motels, restaurants, gas stations and other stores.  The proposed rules are subject to a public comment period through July 6. This is the chance for ice fishermen, winter outdoor enthusiasts and local vendors alike to show support for protecting our local ice from winter shipping activities. You can bet that the commercial interests will make their case that some of these changes are unnecessary.  Using docket number USCG-2015-0084, comments may be submitted:

— Electronically at the Federal Rulemaking Portal at regulations.gov

— By fax at 202-493-2251

— By mail: Docket Management Facility (M-30), U.S. Department of Transportation, West Building Ground Floor, Room W12-140, 1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE, Washington, D.C. 20590-0001.

John Hageman is an expert on everything outdoors. He is retired associated extension agent from the Ohio Sea Grant Program and Stone Laboratory and current president of the Outdoor Writers of Ohio. He was an ice guide for 15 years and participates in year-round fishing, deer-waterfowl-upland bird and game hunting, trapping, target shooting, reloading, wild edibles harvesting, outdoor photography and other related activities.