

Willamette jet boat runs make waves

By LORRAINE NELSON
Of the Emerald

"Row, row, row your boat,
gently down the stream
merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily
life should be serene."

While protesters sang their version of that old standard, Roger Lefler, several passengers and members of the media boarded his jet boat Saturday morning for this year's first Valley River excursion.

Lefler owns and operates Valley River Excursions, a commercial jet boat operation on the Willamette River. He has been at the center of a controversy concerning jet boats on the river since he began the business last year.

About 10 protesters appeared with signs at Lefler's boat dock outside the Valley River Inn Saturday, before Lefler was scheduled to make his first excursion 22 miles up the river to Harrisburg.

Sunday afternoon about nine members of the McKenzie River Flyfishers tied their drift boats to Lefler's dock. He was on the dock at the time and granted them use of the dock but asked that they not let their boats damage his.

Pete Patricelli, a member of the Flyfishers, argued that the public has the right to use the boat dock.

"But the permit for the boat dock says it is a recreational use permit for use by the public," Patricelli said.

"It is for use by the public," Lefler countered. "The public that takes this trip."

The flyfishers expressed concern about erosion from the wake of the jet boat, that one jet boat would lead to another and said that particular stretch of the Willamette would become commercialized.

Michael Piper, a member of the Saturday protesters, said the group protested because the public wasn't consulted about the permit process when Lefler was issued his by the Army Corp of Engineers.

He said the group also believes there are too many unanswered questions about the jet boat's impact on the environment. The group will ask the U.S. Coast Guard to produce an Environ-

mental Impact Statement, he said.

"We would like to keep this (the protest) up on a regular basis," Piper said. "We feel most people coming in will be tourists and we want most of them to know that there are some unanswered questions."

Lefler said he doesn't think the protesters' presence will affect his business.

Lefler runs his 48-seat boat between Eugene and Harrisburg twice a day and will begin running it three times daily starting June 1. The trip takes about two-hours at an average speed of 30 mph.

If the demand for Eugene-Harrisburg excursions is great enough, Lefler plans to add another boat, which he already owns, to increase the number of trips he can make.

That should bring more shouts of protest from those who complained two weeks ago at a Eugene City Council hearing that one boat would lead to others and that jet boats would eventually dominate other types of activity on the water, such as canoeing or inner tubing.

At that meeting, the council instructed City Attorney Stan Long to research the city's legal options for restricting jet boats on the water. That information should be available to the council sometime in June.

Members of the state Department of Environmental Quality will travel to Eugene soon to inspect the section of the river between Eugene and Harrisburg, according to DEQ noise engineer Norman Jette. The inspection and a conference with the State Marine Board will determine whether the DEQ will recommend to the Environmental Quality Commission that the area be designated a "quiet zone," Jette said.

After a State Marine Board hearing on the issue in Eugene last October, the marine board forwarded testimony taken from that hearing to the DEQ without comment or recommendation.

The noise level for the Willamette River is set at 84 decibels under current state standards. With the establishment of a quiet zone, the level would drop to anywhere from 45 to 60 decibels, depending on the time of day.

A reading of the noise level of Lefler's boat, taken in October, measured 82 decibels. The noise level on his new boat has not been measured yet, but Lefler says it is about the same.



Jet boat pilot Roger Lefler

Photo by Jimmi Harris

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Boat pilot says protests alone won't ground him

How does the man who pilots a jet boat down the Willamette River twice a day feel about the protesters who say he should be kept off the river?

Roger Lefler admits that the protests bother him, but that they won't keep him off the river.

"It's like moving into a neighborhood and having all your neighbors come out with signs

because you're a two person family moving into a three bedroom home."

Lefler says he has been extra careful to avoid disturbing canoes or drift boats on the water.

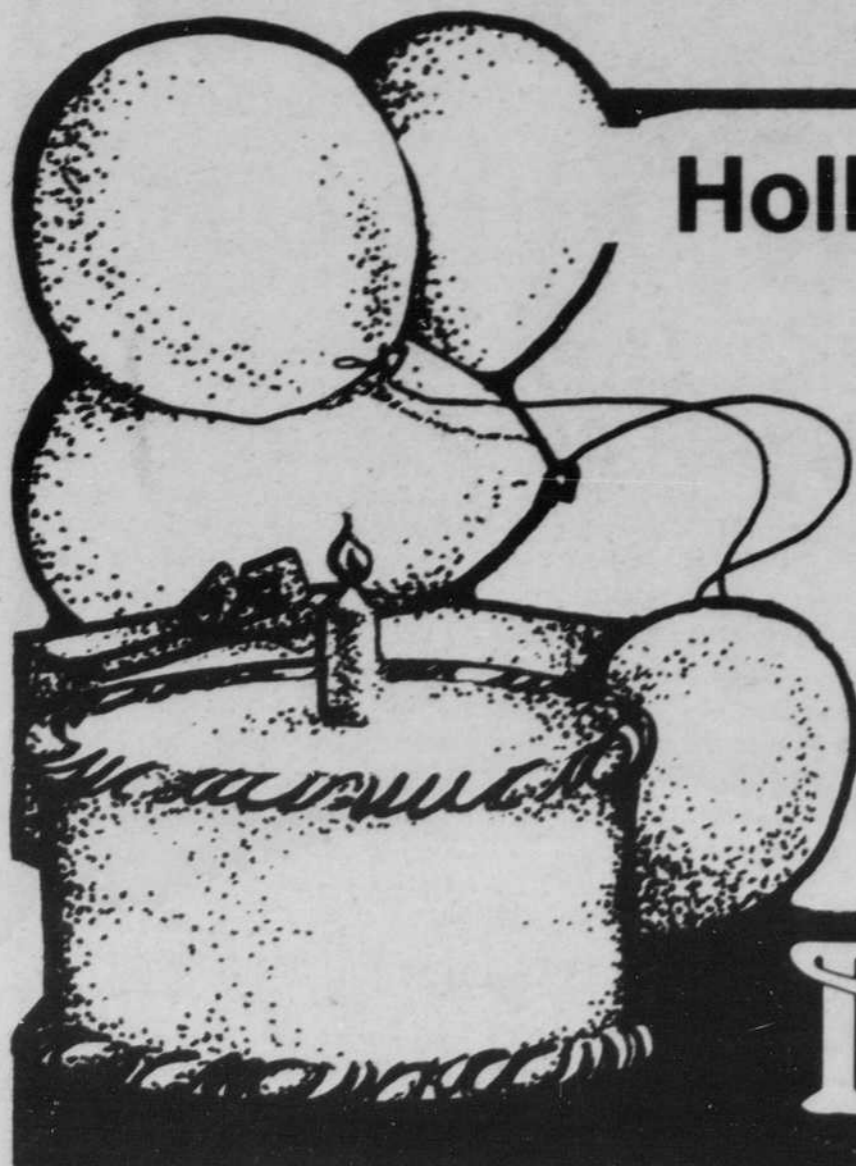
"I'll faint at the sight of my own blood, let alone someone else's," he says.

What's to insure that other jet boaters will be as careful?

"First, we have to get permission to be here. They'd have to go through the whole process I did," he says.

"If I see another boat doing something wrong, I'll stop.

"The best process for complaints (about his boat) is to just come and talk to me.



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