

Good afternoon,

My name is Mike Tocco, and I am here to speak on my experience with wake surf boats. There are a lot of great ways to spend time on the water—fishing, tubing, cruising around with friends—but in the past several years one activity has really taken over lakes and ponds all over the country: wake surfing.

If you've never seen it, wake surfing is exactly what it sounds like. A specialized boat creates a large, rolling wave behind it, and a rider surfs that wave—no rope needed—just riding the endless curl of water as the boat moves along. It's like bringing the ocean to a lake. And I'll tell you, when it's working right, it's one of the most fun things you can do on the water.

You've got music playing, people cheering from the back of the boat, and someone carving back and forth on this perfect wave just a few feet behind the platform. Sometimes they're tossing the rope back to the boat, sometimes they're trying tricks... sometimes they're just trying not to fall in spectacular fashion. Either way, everyone's laughing.

Wake surf boats today are incredible machines. They use ballast tanks that fill with thousands of pounds of water, special hull designs, and surf tabs that shape the wave so riders get this big, clean, surfable wake.

The whole thing is engineered for fun. But that engineering by design comes with something else: big waves.

And big waves can get scary and damaging in a hurry when you're not the one surfing them—especially if you're on a small lake or pond in a small state like Rhode Island.

Now Rhode Island is beautiful. Great coastline, great harbors, and some great small lakes and ponds. But the key word here is small. These aren't massive lakes where waves can spread out and have their massive energy dissipate. On smaller bodies of water, wakes bounce around. They reflect off the shoreline and docks, cross each other, and stack up and can do some damage with erosion, watercraft damage and personal injury.

What starts as one boat making a nice surf wave can turn into a washing machine of rolling water across the entire pond.

And that's how you end up learning a wake lesson the hard way.

I one day last summer I was out on a 19-foot pontoon boat with my wife and my daughter on Echo Lake in Chepachet. Just the three of us. Nice relaxing day. Pontoon boats are supposed to be the most peaceful way to cruise a pond—like a floating living room. You've got comfy seats, a cooler somewhere, maybe some music playing. Nothing stressful about it.

Except on this particular day, there were a couple of wake surf boats running around the pond.

Now again—nothing wrong with wake surfing. It's awesome. But those surf boats are designed to throw waves that look like something you'd expect off the coast of California.

And on a small lake, those waves don't just disappear.

So we're cruising along, enjoying the day, when we start hitting these rollers. Up... down... up again. No big deal at first.

Then a few wakes cross each other.

Then another boat passes.

Suddenly the water looks like a set of moving hills.

We take one wave at a funny angle. Then another one. And then the bow dips just a little lower than you'd like.

And then it happens.

A sheet of water comes right over the front of the pontoon.

Not a splash. Not a sprinkle.

A full-on whoosh across the deck and a wave of water tosses us off the seats and onto the deck of the boat.

When water suddenly starts pouring onto the boat, things get scary very quickly.

We are all drenched and a little banged up. My wife is looking at me with that look that says "How did we get into this situation." The motor comes out of the water screaming with no propeller resistance.

Clothes are wet, towels are soaked, and I'm suddenly very motivated to find calmer water, which isn't that easy on a small lake.

We survived, of course. But let's just say it was a good reminder that wakes don't care what kind of boat you're in, and their power is immense.

You'd think I would have that day seared into my memory.

But apparently a reminder was yet to come.

Because not too long after that, around the 4th of July, I was on a 25-foot boat with about ten people on board. Bigger boat. More people. More confidence.

We're cruising around the pond, everyone talking, laughing, enjoying the day. And once again, somewhere out there are wake surf boats doing what wake surf boats do—throwing big, beautiful waves.

Only this time we meet those waves head-on.

The bow rises.

Drops.

Rises again.

And then—just like before—

WHOOSH.

Another wall of water comes straight over the front of the boat, only with a bow rider, the water just stays inside the boat. The bilge pump kicks on, there's an uneasy feeling as the boat sits down lower in the water with a half foot of water on the deck.

Ten people instantly go from relaxed passengers to a coordinated panic response team.

People jumping up, bags flying, someone yelling, people scrambling for life vests.

In that moment, you realize something important about boating: it doesn't matter whether you're on a 19-foot pontoon boat or a 25-foot bow rider packed with friends. If the waves line up wrong, water will absolutely remind you of who's in charge.

Now don't get me wrong—I still love wake surfing. Watching someone ride that endless wave behind the boat is amazing. It's athletic, it's exciting, and it's one of the most entertaining things you can do on the water. I've ridden in them, driven them and surfed behind them. But on Lake Winnepesaukee, in 70' of water, hundreds of yards from the shoreline.

But those two “unexpected soaking” experiences taught me something valuable.

Wake surf boats create incredible waves... and on smaller lakes or ponds, those potentially damaging waves affect everyone and everything in their path.

So the lesson is simple: your wake is legally an extension of your boat. The small RI lakes just aren't large enough to allow those rolling waves to settle calmly in the distance.

On a big lake, those wakes spread out and their energy dissipates.

But on a Rhode Island lake... they come back to visit you, your boat, your dock, and your shoreline.

And they seem to bring half the lake with them. The fact remains that a big wave is really only safe on a big lake. I urge the DEM to take a hard look at the effects of these boats and limit or ban them from small lakes and ponds.

Thank you.