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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 21, 2007

The News Democrat

Search suspended for deckhand

River conditions impede efforts to find man, 35, presumed drowned

By PHYLLIS CODLING

The News-Democrat

Searchers from several counties were unable to bring resolution this past week to the family of a 35-year-old Paducah man believed to have drowned in the Ohio River near Ghent on Wednesday morning, March 14.

Crewmembers for the Jean Akin, a towboat owned by the Paducah-based Crouse Corp., reported that the deckhand fell into the water around 5 a.m., said Ed Webb, director of Carroll County emergency operations. Webb and about 40 searchers from Boone County, Lexington, Frankfort and Carroll, Trimble and Gallatin counties, began looking for the man that morning.

The search continued Thursday and Friday, despite cold rain, biting wind, a swift current and choppy waters on the river.

The search was suspended Saturday because of the rising river, Webb said. According to the National Weather Service, the river was at 22 feet at



Photo by Phyllis Codling

Members of the Boone County Water Rescue team launch a boat Thursday at Point Park to help in the search for a deckhand who reportedly fell off the Jean Akin early Wednesday morning. The man was still missing at deadline yesterday.

Markland Dam on Tuesday, March 13. The river rose to 35 feet on Sunday and was expected to rise to nearly 42 feet at the dam by today.

“It’ll be more toward the end of the week, probably Friday,” before the river recedes sufficiently to resume the search, he said yesterday.

Webb has not released the name of the victim, pending notification of family, and because he said that at this point, it is still considered a “missing person” case.

“We can’t assume he is dead or alive,” since a body has not been found. “We are trying our best to bring this to a resolution.”

He described the victim as a white male about 5 feet, 10 inches tall, weighing about 185-190 pounds.

Emmett Neal, vice president of Crouse Corporation, said the deckhand had worked for the company for three years. He was unable to provide further information because of Crouse’s ongoing investigation.

“Our thoughts and prayers go out to his family,” Neal said.

Lt. Tina Owen of the U.S. Coast Guard said workers had been moving barges around and that the man was not wearing a life vest at the time of the accident. She said other crewmembers either saw or heard him when he fell into the water.

Using cadaver dogs, about 40 searchers on Wednesday had determined a “point of interest” where the dogs indicated a body might be, about a half-mile upriver from the Ghent boat ramp. Webb said the location was near where crewmembers reported the man had fallen in.

On Thursday morning, Webb brought in local rescue teams and the cadaver dog teams to confirm that the point of interest hadn’t changed. He brought his teams out of the water while the Boone County Water Rescue team, using larger boats and sophisticated sonar equipment, scanned the location and the surrounding water. He said Boone County also had divers ready to go into the water in case the body was found.

While the Boone County team was at work on the river, Dennis Sharon, Gallatin County’s fish and wildlife officer, and rescue-team member Larry Moore of Carrollton warmed up at Snow’s restaurant in Ghent with cups of coffee. Both have been involved in search-and-rescue operations for more than 30 years.

Sharon, a Worthville resident, said in such cases, a drowning victim’s body generally will “sink and stay where it goes down,” particularly in cold water. “The body will stay down about 60 hours, and usually will resurface within 100 feet” of where the person was last seen in the water. He said the depth of the water at the point of interest Thursday was about 30 feet.

In addition to Boone County, the search involved personnel from Milton Fire and Rescue; Trimble County Fire and Rescue; and Commonwealth Canines Search and Rescue members Jeff Bardroff of Frankfort, Sharon Franklin of Lexington, and Charlie Webb, who also is Carroll County’s search-and-rescue coordinator. Offers of assistance also came from Cincinnati and elsewhere.

Shelley Byrne, a reporter for The Paducah Sun, contributed to this report.

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