

Beach-goers sip their way around booze ban



Frank Machler, USFS law enforcement officer. tells a group their beer is not allowed at the beach.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

ZEPHYR COVE – It was hard to know an alcohol ban was in place at Zephyr Cove beach on July 4.

“Why can’t I drink today and yesterday I could?” Neil Fenton asked. The Irishman, one of about a group of 25 on the South Shore beach, practically begged U.S. Forest Service employees to be able to keep his beer.

No such luck.



A beer can on the Fourth of July floats in Lake Tahoe.

The Forest Service, which owns this beach along with many others in the basin, for several years has been saying no to alcohol on July 4 to help prevent things from getting out of hand.

With about 10,000 people just at this beach – as well as the neighboring Dreyfus Estate, the Forest Service is on a quest to maintain control. One way is curbing alcohol consumption.

People were lining up at 6:30am Saturday to get onto Zephyr Cove beach. With the thunderstorm rolling through midmorning, it scattered some people and kept the temperatures cooler than

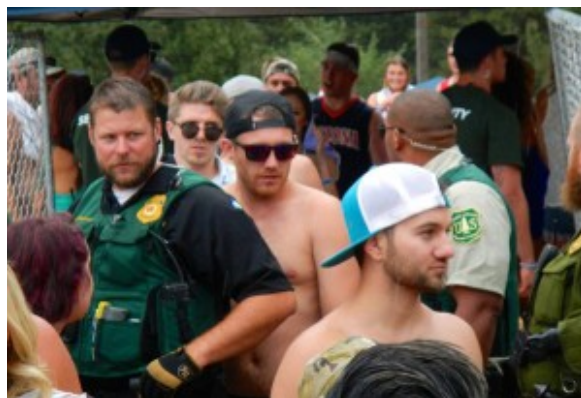
usual. This may have played a role in keeping the alcohol-induced troubles to a minimum.



Vehicles and pedestrians fill the lanes of Highway 50.

While signs were posted – and were up the day before the Fourth – and the media had gotten the word out about the booze ban, some people said they weren't aware of the rules and others deliberately tried to get around them.

Jonathan Cook-Fisher, a forest protection officer with the USFS, had warned a multigenerational group at 11:30am about the alcohol ban. Frank Machler, a law enforcement officer with the USFS, saw the same people more than three hours later with beer cans next to them that anyone could see. He waited to see the cooler being hauled away. The older man in the group – at least in his 60s – glared at Cook-Fisher and his partner for the day, Gerard Dean, when he saw them later.



USFS law enforcement officers patrol the beer

garden at Zephyr Cove.

Cook-Fisher and Dean run into the Irishmen who've stopped in the forest to drink some more. Cans are scattered about. They are told to move on, but to first take their trash. They mumble and mosey on.

Beer cans on the beach prove the ban is being ignored. Some are empties on the beach, some float in the water. An abundance of trash litters the sand. No obvious trash cans are in sight.

Others try not to be so blatant with their alcohol consumption. On the party side a guy is drinking a cola colored beverage from a bottle that says it is water. An officer confiscates it, pours it out. It wasn't just soda.



Frank Machler, center, talks with Neil Fenton, right, about getting rid of his booze, as USFS employees Gerard Dean and Jonathan Cook-Fisher standby.

Instead of traditional water bottles, people are getting more deceptive with their contraband. Shampoo and sunscreen bottles are being used to transport alcohol. The problem is the

container isn't always washed out well so the imbiber ends up vomiting.

Machler said he likes to get people to pour the alcohol out or take it back to the vehicle. Citations are not immediate. If things get out of hand, the resort can tell people to leave or sheriff's deputies can take people to jail.

Machler also has no tolerance for marijuana use. It's illegal on federal property no matter what the state laws say – even medical marijuana. A guy admits to using, but said it was hours before and not on federal land.



A man receives a citation for disorderly conduct and interfering with a law enforcement officer.

Cook-Fisher said that's one of the things those patrolling the beaches have to do – make quick decisions in the moment. They weigh the seriousness of the infraction against possibly taking resources from where they might better be served. Is education more beneficial than a citation? Ruining someone's fun at Tahoe is not their goal; instead it's about making them and the others at the beach safe.

Another way to help maintain calm has been to increase the number of people who are working the Fourth holiday. On a normal summer weekend the Forest Service has 10 to 15 people

in the field. (This doesn't count fire personnel.) This weekend more than 40 additional USFS employees are in the basin working.

Cook-Fisher said the biggest change in the last five years is the collaboration between agencies.

"There's a common understanding that resources are limited and we need to share," Cook-Fisher told *Lake Tahoe News*.

At Zephyr Cove, in addition to Forest Service employees, Douglas County sheriff's deputies were out, the resort hired Marines to work security, and Tahoe Douglas fire regulates how many people can be in the beer garden. Tahoe Douglas paramedics administer the serious medical aid. Before they can arrive the USFS Klamath firefighters who are in the region for added fire suppression relief render basic aid. One woman was about to get an ambulance ride in her bikini. She cut her elbow and thigh climbing a fence. Stitches were in her future.



Piles of garbage at Zephyr Cove beach on July 4.

Cook-Fisher ends up giving medical attention to a group of women, one of whom is clearly intoxicated. Her fingernail is nearly torn off and she is whimpering in pain.

"Our purpose today is not about writing citations. It's public safety and protecting natural resources," Cook-Fisher said.

At this South Shore beach a temporary fence is erected on the Fourth with the goal of keeping families on one side, the more raucous revelers on the other.

The only alcohol allowed is in the beer garden that Zephyr Cove Resort runs. It's hopping in there, with music playing and people dancing. Several law enforcement officers monitor who comes and goes.

About 4pm the beer garden closes. The beach closes about an hour later for a short time. Many people were headed for a place where they could watch the fireworks, like Nevada Beach.

For authorities, it was just another day at the beach – Lake Tahoe style.