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Title: Rescued boater avoids jail time
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By KRISTINA Smith Staff writer

A man the U.S. Coast Guard rescued from the Portage River three times in five days avoided a possible 24-month jail sentence Friday by accepting a plea deal.

Instead of jail, a judge ordered Donald Neff, 39, Grove City, to serve 100 hours of community service and pay \$715 in fines and costs in Ottawa County Municipal Court.

"We're extremely happy," said his attorney, Thomas DeBacco of Port Clinton. "All of the serious charges against him were dismissed. He was looking at a lot of potential jail time."

Judge Fritz Hany also suspended a 60-day jail term and ordered Neff to pay restitution for an Ottawa County Sheriff's Office trailer hitch that was broken during one of the rescues.

Neff pleaded no contest and was found guilty of two misdemeanor counts of reckless operation. In exchange, the prosecutor's office dismissed two counts each of inducing panic and failure to comply.

"I'm satisfied with the resolution of the case," Ottawa County Assistant Prosecutor Christy Cole said. "The gentleman was a first offender, so the sentence was consistent with how the court would treat someone of his background. I don't believe this will be a reoccurring incident for this gentleman."

In November 2005, Neff attempted to take two boats in the Portage River to the ramp at Vacationland Marina in Erie Township despite the river's shallow water levels.

After the first craft, a 25-foot pleasure cruiser, was stuck in the mud, Coast Guard Petty Officer Tim Robertson said he warned Neff to wait until the water level increased before attempting to remove any boats. Neff, however, ignored the warning and returned with a 17-foot bass boat.

Each became lodged in the mud during separate incidents.

Four days later, Neff returned and again got the boats stuck.

DeBacco said Neff did not know how to handle the problem because the Coast Guard gave him conflicting messages.

"One officer told him not to go out again," he said. "Another told him, 'You've got to get your boat out of the river.'"

Neff was concerned he might not get his boat to the marina before it closed for the season, so he took time away from his job in the Columbus area to take care of it, DeBacco said.

"He didn't want to lose his investment," he said. "The guy was trying to do the right thing, and the full

force of the law came down on him."

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