

Dept. of Natural Resources: Concludes investigation into 2019 fatal boat crash on Mississippi River

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MADISON, Wis. – The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), along with partner agencies, today announced the investigation into a 2019 fatal boat crash has come to a conclusion with a conviction.

The DNR and partner agencies worked together on the investigation and reconstruction of the crash using their extensive training, tools and technology to resolve the investigation and bring closure to the deceased man's family.

The crash occurred Aug. 17, 2019 when two boats collided in the vicinity of French Slough and the Black River on Pool 8 of the Mississippi River near La Crosse.

La Crosse County Sheriff's Deputies responded to the crash and interviewed the two boat operators at the boat landing. The initial report indicated that a jon boat, operated by the victim, cut in front of a bass boat and failed to yield the right-of-way where there was a blind corner. The victim was knocked unconscious as a result of the collision but was walking and talking when the deputies arrived at the boat landing.

The victim initially denied medical attention and planned to go to the hospital himself. He was later diagnosed with several internal head injuries from the collision, which proved to be fatal. The victim was pronounced as deceased the following day.

The crash case then shifted to a death investigation.

"The evidence from the investigation proved the initial report was not actually what

happened,” said DNR Conservation Warden Matt Groppi.

Witnesses heard the crash but did not see it. And several witnesses also went to the scene after the crash to render assistance.

The DNR worked together with the La Crosse County Sheriff’s Office, City of La Crosse Police Department, City of La Crosse Fire Department and Wisconsin State Patrol to reconstruct the crash.

Utilizing sonar, the team was able to locate the motor cowling from the jon boat’s outboard. They were also able to use 3D scanning technology out of the water to find more evidence of the crash to confirm what occurred.

“Reconstruction was so important,” said Groppi. “We found the bass boat was overtaking the jon boat and it was the bass boat that should have yielded.”

The operator of the bass boat was charged with negligent operation and was convicted in a plea agreement in November 2022.