

Man drowns at Great Crossing dam

- By Mike Scogin Georgetown News-Graphic
- Aug 9, 2022 Updated Aug 9, 2022



A sign at Great Crossing Dam warns visitors of the danger in getting too close to turbulent water. (News-Graphic Photo by Emily Perkins)

A 39-year-old man who was rafting near the Great Crossing dam Sunday, drowned when he was pulled over the dam.

Joe Wilkerson, 39, of Georgetown died Monday morning at Georgetown Community Hospital, said Scott County Coroner Mark Sutton. Wilkerson's 17-year-old son, who was rafting with his father, and a bystander pulled him from the waters about 1:20 p.m. Sunday, said Scott County Sheriff's Deputy Eddie Hart.

At the shore, an unidentified Scott County deputy performed CPR on Wilkerson before he was transported to the hospital, said Scott County Fire Chief John Ward.

The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife is investigating because the event took place on the water. The dam is owned by the state agency, as well.

The day was sunny and witnesses said about two dozen kayakers and swimmers were in the area when the incident took place. The water was higher and the current stronger than usual due to recent rains, but not so much that a gate recently installed by the Scott County Fiscal Court would be closed. Procedures to close the gate include water covering an access road at Great Crossing Park and a higher water height than was noted on Sunday, said Scott County Judge-Executive Joe Pat Covington.

The drowning is the second at Great Crossing over the past 15 months. On May 5, 2021, Eduardo Ponce was kayaking with his fiancée when swift water pushed the couple over the dam. Ponce died, but his fiancée survived the incident. Recent rains had increased the water current on that date, officials said.

Since then, the fate of the dam has been much discussed as officials with Fish and Wildlife encouraged removing the dam because its condition is deteriorating. The dam is a low-head dam, which is deceptively dangerous as the water can appear calm and inviting, but beneath the surface, especially when the current increases, an undertow can pull and trap victims in a circular cycle, officials have said. The danger is increased due to debris accumulating at the base of the dam, below the surface.

The state conducted an examination of the dam, and discovered it is failing, although the failure does not appear to be imminent.