



## Boaters idle on swollen rivers in Ike's aftermath

By JIM SUHR – 9 hours ago

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Ron Gumm has made the best of 10 days spent with his apartment-like boat docked near here — taking in museums, scenic drives, eateries and, of course, the Gateway Arch — but he was eager to head down the Mississippi River.

If only he could.

Rivers swollen by this month's torrential remnants of Hurricane Ike continued idling the North Carolina retiree and other boaters making "The Great Loop," a generally yearlong circumnavigation of eastern North America that takes them into Canada and eventually south to the Gulf Coast for the winter.

Dozens of boats — many part of the nine-year-old America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association — remained stalled Monday along the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, unable to pass stretches of inland waterways the Coast Guard began closing to recreational traffic last week because of debris and unsafe currents.

Midwest runoff from Hurricane Ike was still feeding the swollen rivers, said Lt. Chuck Mellor of the Coast Guard's St. Louis office. "Even though the rains aren't here anymore, the river's still high," he said. "And it's taking several days to lower itself."

Mellor's advice to Gumm and other so-called "Loopers": Sit tight and be patient.

"It's going to go on probably for the rest of this week," Mellor said. "It's really hard to guess because the river changes daily."

The Coast Guard cited Ike's runoff in banning recreational traffic from at least 75 miles of the Upper Mississippi River from Chester, Ill., southeast of St. Louis, to near Granite City, Ill., a St. Louis suburb. Two hundred miles of the Illinois River — stretching near Milton in western Illinois to the north-central part of the state — was closed to casual boaters Monday.

Caught in between are about four dozen members of the Great Loop association unable to resume their trek to an eventual Oct. 20-23 reunion at an Alabama state park.

Near Ottawa, Ill., southwest of Chicago, 15 "loopers" have called the Heritage Harbor Marina home in recent days, unable to get any farther down the Illinois River. As many as 11 more boaters were planning to stop there this week until the river gets the green

light, marina consultant John Mobley said.

"Everybody's just staging, getting ready to move downstream," said Mobley, who took the loop tour in 2004-05 and is known to the now-stranded guests as "Captain Moe." "I know exactly what they're going through and what makes them happy."

What makes them happy are things like courtesy cars that shuttle the self-professed "river rats" to grocery or liquor stores. The marina has Wi-Fi, not to mention a 65-foot dinner boat that hosts 5 o'clock cocktails and Jimmy Buffett tunes.

Gumm has made do during the forced impasse, taking time to clean his 38-foot trawler dubbed "Etcetera" — a vessel with all the accoutrements of good living, including a kitchen, full bathroom, living room and bedroom. Heating and air conditioning? It's got that, too.

"We've fixed things that have needed to be fixed for a long time," Gumm said, more than four months into the voyage he and his wife launched from their hometown of Wilmington, N.C. They plan to spend the winter and much of next year in the Tennessee Valley — an area they couldn't see during their maiden attempt at the loop three years ago, when Hurricane Katrina savaged the Gulf Coast and deluged the Midwest.

"Right now, we can't get past St. Louis," Gumm said from his boat, still docked at a marina just north of St. Louis in Alton, Ill., and biding his time. He knows he doesn't have much choice.

"When you get on a boat, if you're not patient, you get in trouble."

On the Net:

- America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association: <http://www.greatloop.com>