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OHIOPYLE RAPIDS THE PERFECT BACKDROP FOR SKILLS EVENT

Uniontown, PA – The Youghiogheny River’s whitewater rapids took center stage this month, as Region 13 Water Rescue teams converged on Ohiopyle State Park for a one-of-a-kind event.

Hosted by the Fayette County Swiftwater Rescue Team, “Paddling the Fall Foliage” saw almost 50 participants from 11 western Pennsylvania teams earning their Swiftwater Rescue Technician (SRT) certifications.

SRTs are classified as emergency responders who’ve completed Pennsylvania Fishing and Boating Commission training curriculums and are qualified to enter swiftwater conditions, such as Ohiopyle’s rapids, for rescue operations.

Jim Bittner, Fayette County Emergency Management Agency Planner/Training officer and Fayette County SRT Leader, said teams have participated in various training exercises throughout the region twice annually since 2008, but this event marked Fayette’s first time hosting.

“For some of these teams, it’s the first time they’ve stepped into a whitewater element. It’s definitely not something you always get to see,” Bittner said. “The City of Pittsburgh team, for example, mostly responds to flooding on the city streets and may call other regional teams for assistance, but they may not have the chance to work with rapids like we have here. It’s a really valuable learning experience for our fellow teams to see some of the other hazards that are out there.”

Participants spent their day on the river learning to read water dynamics, refreshing paddling skills through multiple classes of rapids, and practicing self-rescue skills in swimmers’ rapids.

“It helped them understand the reality of whitewater and what that water can actually do,” Bittner said. “So far, a lot of these guys have learned about it from pictures or in videos, but here they actually got a chance to experience the hazards firsthand.”

Bittner said the event was also unique in that all four of Ohiopyle Borough’s rafting outfitters participated, with almost 30 professional guides leading the exercises. Those represented were Laurel Highlands River Tours, Ohiopyle Trading Post, Whitewater Adventures and Wilderness Voyagers.

Also on hand were staff members and volunteers from Fayette County Emergency Management Agency, Uniontown Salvation Army Disaster Services and Fayette EMS. The Salvation Army provided warm beverages and lunch for the event.

Bittner said Ohiopyle State Park Manager Ken Bisbee and Fayette County Commissioner Vince Vicites also supported the event, which was deemed a “huge success.”

“All the feedback we’ve gotten has been awesome. It went very well. A lot of the teams said they experienced things they’ve never seen before and realized the paddling isn’t difficult if you let the water do the work for you,” he said. “We want to do this every year or so as an exercise to keep everyone’s skills up.”

For more information about the Fayette County Swiftwater Rescue Team, contact Bittner at 724-430-1277, ext. 248, or visit www.facebook.com/fayetteswrt/.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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