

Officials warn of drowning hazards in irrigation canals

By RUTH BROWN rbrown@idahopress.com Jul 21, 2015

NAMPA — The hazard of swimming and playing near canals hits close to home for Daren Coon, whose 2-year-old cousin drowned in a Middleton irrigation ditch.

Today, Coon is the secretary and treasurer for the Nampa and Meridian Irrigation District. The district urges residents of Ada and Canyon counties to stay out of canals this summer, despite the rising summer temperatures.

Idaho has the second-highest unintentional drowning rate in the nation for children ages 1 to 5, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

With more than 500 miles of canals winding around Ada and Canyon counties, the cold and swift water flows at about 4 mph.

The district water system includes about 80 canals and 80 drains, irrigating about 69,000 acres, many of which are in urban areas. They stretch through Boise, Meridian, Nampa and the outskirts of Caldwell.

For Coon, stressing the importance of water safety has been important since age 13 when his cousin drowned. The toddler's mother turned her back for only a few minutes when the accident occurred.

"It happens so extraordinarily fast," said Coon, who reflected on the residents who have drowned in the irrigation system over the last few years.

Nationwide, drowning is the leading cause of accidental death for children up to 4 years old and the second-leading cause of accidental death for all children up to age 14, according to the CDC.

In April, a 19-month-old Kuna child drowned in a canal off Ten Mile Road.

Families intentionally swimming in the canals, however, is the most alarming situation for Greg Curtis, district water superintendent for the Nampa and Meridian Irrigation District.

Curtis said almost every day officials see someone sticking a foot into a canal, especially small children.

“Kids are drawn to water, I understand that,” Curtis said. “But what I don’t understand is when parents are encouraging them. If (the child) slips in, you’ve taught him it’s a fun place to be.”

Gov. Butch Otter recognized the district’s safety efforts by issuing a special proclamation declaring May 27-June 2 as Nampa and Meridian Irrigation District Canal Safety Recognition Week in Idaho.

The district campaign airs TV and radio public service announcements about swimming safety. The radio spots are on both Spanish and English stations. They also work with public schools to talk to children about swimming safety in canals.

The issue of drownings does not pertain just to children.

In May, 50-year-old Bonita L. Campbell died in the Ridenbaugh Canal near West Rose Hill and South Shoshone streets due to accidental drowning. She was found when a citizen reported seeing what appeared to be a submerged body.

There are “no trespassing” signs near canals, Curtis said, but they are often ignored.

Canals and drains are private property, making it illegal to be in them. When swimming in the canals, residents are trespassing against two owners — the irrigation district and the property owners.

Coon explained that the irrigation district owns the canal and drainage structure, and the property owner whose land the canal crosses owns the land beneath the canal.

In the past month, Canyon County Sheriff’s Office deputies have responded to several trespassing complaints regarding people swimming in canals, Sheriff’s Capt. Dana Maxfield said.

“Recently, most of our complaints have been about people swimming in the Low Line Canal near Homedale Road,” Maxfield said. “Our deputies always take the time to educate the swimmers on the dangers of swimming in canals along with warning them for trespassing.”

On repeat offenses, law enforcement considers citing the individual, but in order to do so a person of authority for the canal or a property owner must sign the citation, Maxfield said.

Coon said many reports of swimming in canals come from property owners complaining about trash left behind or noise problems.