

Two canal drownings increase urgency of safety campaigns

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Capital Press

Sean Ellis/Capital Press Otto Otter hands out water safety coloring books to children June 3 during Meridian Public Works Week in Idaho. The Bureau of Reclamation water safety mascot reminded children and their parents of the dangers posed by canals and irrigation ditches.

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Irrigation districts in Southwestern Idaho are again reminding people in the state's largest urban area to keep themselves and their children away from canals and ditches.

MERIDIAN, Idaho — Following the recent drowning deaths of two people in Southwestern Idaho canals, irrigation districts in the area feel a sense of urgency to remind the public that canals are dangerous places to be around.



An average of three people a year die in Idaho canals and irrigation ditches, according to Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District officials, but two people, including a toddler, have already drowned in Treasure Valley canals since April.

“This unfortunately is an unusual year because we’ve started out very early,” said Daren Coon, secretary-treasurer of NMID, Idaho’s largest in terms of patrons. “We hope it’s an anomaly, that the rest of the year will end more peacefully and there won’t be any more incidences.”

NMID borrowed the services of Bureau of Reclamation water safety mascot Otto Otter to remind parents and their children that canals are not playgrounds.

During the annual Meridian Public Works Week, which attracts thousands of people, the life-sized mascot handed out coloring books to children that serve as reminders to them and their parents of the dangers canals pose.

Otter is a magnet for children and can carry that water safety message more effectively than adults, Coon said.

“Canals are not playgrounds and people drown in them. It’s extremely important that parents understand that so they can educate their children to stay away from them,” Coon said.

To make its way to farm country, irrigation water stored in the Boise River system winds its way west through a maze of hundreds of miles of canals, laterals and irrigation districts that plow straight through Idaho’s largest cities of Boise, Meridian and Nampa.

As the valley continues its rapid growth, getting that water safety message out is only becoming more important, and the tragic start to this year’s irrigation season only heightens the concern, Coon said.

Besides NMID’s annual TV and radio water safety campaign, district officials also attend myriad events where there

are opportunities to remind people of the dangers canals pose.

Pioneer Irrigation District contributes to several water safety campaigns in the region and posts “irrigation use only” and “no swimming” signs along its canals and uses gates in particularly dangerous areas, said PID Manager Mark Zirschky.

But that’s still not enough, in some cases, he said.

After a retention pond in Caldwell flooded during a recent rainstorm, PID employees saw a kayak and kids with snorkels playing in it, oblivious to the extreme danger they would have been in had the clogged discharge pump suddenly cleared.

“There were adults everywhere,” Zirschky said. “They continued to allow the ‘fun’ to go on.”

Zirschky said PID fights a constant but important battle on educating the public about canal dangers with a simple but strong message: “Stay alive by staying out. If you jump into one of these canals, there’s a better than even chance it’s not going to end well.”