

USBR PODCAST EPISODE 2009-03

WATER SAFETY

(approx run time=9:36)

(SOUNDER OPEN)

Welcome to the Bureau of Reclamation Great Plains Region Podcast...

For millions of visitors, spring means it's time to pack up and head for the nearest reservoir for fun and recreation on the water. Swimming, boating, jet skiing, sailing or trying your luck with a rod and reel are great ways to get away from it all and beat the heat all summer long.

However you mix water and fun, the most important thing is to enjoy it safely.

The Great Plains Region of the Bureau of Reclamation manages 80 reservoirs in nine states: That's about 350-thousand acres of surface water to play on, and more than 14-million residents do just that every year. And while all that water offers boundless opportunity for recreation, it also offers danger for the unprepared or unwary.

A large pleasure or fishing boat can weigh as much as the average family car...and it doesn't have brakes.

Great Plains Regional Safety and Health Manager Steve Marquez tells us there's plenty of help to ensure that you and your vessel are ready for a safe time on the water:

(steve01 :23)

"WHAT WE RECOMMEND THAT THEY DO IS ATTEND A BOATING SAFETY COURSE OR SKIPPER COURSE. NOW THERE'S MANY STATES THAT REQUIRE CERTIFICATION WITH SPECIFIC CONTENTS AND COURSES AND OTHER ONES THAT JUST RECOMMEND THAT YOU TAKE ONE. THERE'S SOME GREAT ORGANIZATIONS LIKE THE

COAST GUARD AUXILIARY, BOAT U-S, AND SOME OTHERS OUT THERE THAT PROVIDE FREE TRAINING OR LOW COST TRAINING THAT I WOULD RECOMMEND.”

But knowledge alone isn't enough. Marquez says you also need to be proactive when it comes to making sure that a day's fun doesn't turn into tragedy when things go wrong:

(steve02 :37)

“ONE OF THE OTHER OPTIONS THAT PEOPLE REALLY MUST CONSIDER IS USING PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICES. IN MANY STATES, IT'S A REQUIREMENT FOR CHILDREN, BUT WE IN THE SAFETY INDUSTRY ARE PROMOTING WEARING PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICES FULL TIME WHEN IN A BOAT. ALSO FOR BOATERS, THEY SHOULD HAVE A PLAN, A FLOAT PLAN, A BOATING PLAN ON WHERE THEY'RE GOING, HOW LONG THEY'RE GOING TO BE OUT, AND MAKE THAT PLAN AVAILABLE TO SOMEBODY WHO CAN REACT. AND THEN, LAST OF ALL, YOU'LL HAVE TO STICK TO THAT PLAN TO ENSURE PEOPLE CAN COME TO YOUR RESCUE IF NECESSARY.”

When boating or otherwise recreating in an unfamiliar location, Marquez says you can often get valuable and potentially life-saving information from local agencies or concessionaires:

(steve04 :33)

“TWO-THIRDS OF RECLAMATION FACILITIES ARE MANAGED BY OTHERS, WE CALL THEM OUR MANAGING PARTNERS. THEY COULD BE OTHER FEDERAL AGENCIES, THEY COULD BE STATE, COUNTY, CITY OR IRRIGATION DISTRICTS ENTITIES. SO WHAT THEY DO IS THEY PROVIDE INFORMATION AT MARINAS, BOAT DOCKS AND CAMPING AREAS NEXT TO THE WATER, SO WE THINK THAT IT'S VERY IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY FOR FIRST-TIME VISITORS TO TAKE A LOOK AT THE SAFETY INFORMATION SO THEY CAN HAVE GOOD, SOLID INFORMATION ON THE HAZARDS ASSOCIATED WITH THAT AREA.

Sometimes, the hazards are strictly self-created...

In many states, operating a vessel while under the influence carries the same legal consequences as driving a vehicle on dry land with even greater potential for disaster:

(steve03 :07)

“WE’RE LOOKING AT CLEARLY HALF OF THE CASES THAT WE HAVE OF DROWNING INCIDENTS, HAVE SOME ALCOHOL IN RELATION TO IT.

Other times, nature can set a trap, especially this time of year:

(steve05 :45)

“THE WEATHER CHANGES QUICKLY OUT HERE IN THE WEST, AND FIRST THING OUR VISITORS SHOULD DO IS STAY INFORMED OF THE CURRENT WEATHER AS WELL AS THE FORECAST. NOW WE KNOW THOSE FORECASTS AREN’T ALWAYS ACCURATE SO DON’T BANK ON IT BEING CLEAR AND HIGH PRESSURE THE WHOLE TIME YOU’RE OUT THERE. SO WHAT YOU REALLY NEED TO DO IS WHEN THOSE WINDS PICK UP, OR WHEN THE WEATHER APPEARS OMNIOUS, YOU REALLY HAVE TO CONSIDER GETTING OFF THE WATER. MANY OF THE ACCIDENTS THAT OCCUR IN OUR FACILITIES ARE EITHER ANGLERS IN BOATS OR JUST RECREATIONAL BOATING ARE FROM CAPSIZED BOATS OR FROM WAVE ACTION CAUSING PEOPLE TO FALL OVERBOARD, SO THAT IS VERY COMMON ESPECIALLY IN OUR LARGER BODIES OF WATER AND PEOPLE SHOULD TAKE HEED.”

Both boaters and those on the shore need to maintain awareness of their surroundings at all times so they don’t get caught unaware should the water level change suddenly:

(steve06” :48

“OUR FACILITIES SERVE MANY PURPOSES OTHER THAN RECREATION. WE PROVIDE WATER FOR INDUSTRIAL AND MUNICIPAL USE AS WELL AS IRRIGATION FOR OUR NATION’S

FARMS. WE ALSO PRODUCE ELECTRICAL POWER AS WELL AS PROVIDING FLOOD PROTECTION, SO SOMETIMES STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN ALL THESE DEMANDS IS DIFFICULT. AND WHILE IT'S NOT THE NORM, SOMETIMES WE HAVE TO RELEASE WATER IN SIZEABLE QUANTITIES THAT COULD HAVE EFFECT ON DOWNSTREAM POPULATIONS. SO OUR VISITORS WHO ARE CAMPING DOWNSTREAM, WHO ARE VISITING IN OUR FACILITIES SHOULD JUST BE AWARE THAT THE EXISTING WATER LEVELS THAT ARE PRESENT MIGHT NOT ALWAYS BE AT THAT LEVEL AND THEY SHOULD JUST BE AWARE THAT CHANGE CAN HAPPEN AND SOMETIMES IT HAPPENS QUICKLY."

The Bureau of Reclamation also maintains thousands of miles of canals and laterals to meet the demands of agriculture and water districts. More than half the nation's vegetables and a quarter of fresh fruits and nuts are produced on the ten-million acres watered by Reclamation projects. While that canal water may look cool and inviting, Marquez says it should under no circumstances be looked upon as a way for anyone, especially youngsters, to beat the heat:

(steve07 1:03)

"PARENTS FIRST AND FOREMOST NEED TO UNDERSTAND THAT WHILE OUR CANALS APPEAR SLOW MOVING AND UNASSUMING THEY ARE IN FACT VERY DANGEROUS. THE CURRENTS ARE FASTER THAN THEY APPEAR AND THEY CAN OFTENTIMES OVERPOWER EVEN A STRONG SWIMMER. YOU COMPOUND THAT WITH CANAL BANKS, THEY'RE EITHER EARTHEN OR CONCRETE AND THEY ARE VERY SLIPPERY, SO YOU HAVE A TIRED SWIMMER FIGHTING THE CURRENT TRYING TO GET OUT ON THE SLIPPERY SURFACE AND IT'S VERY DIFFICULT, WITH LITTLE CHANCE OF SELF-RESCUE. ALSO OUR CANALS HAVE STRUCTURES THAT CONTROL AND DIVERT THE WATER IT MIGHT CHANGE THE WATER TO SMALLER CANALS AND LATERALS, IT MIGHT TAKE THE WATER UNDERNEATH THE ROAD OR A RAILROAD AND AS A RESULT THESE STRUCTURES POSE PARTICULAR HAZARDS WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE CURRENTS AND EDDIES THAT ARE PRODUCED WHEN WE

CHANGE THE FLOW. SO SOMETIMES THESE CURRENTS AND EDDIES ARE ENOUGH TO PREVENT EVEN THE STRONGEST SWIMMER FROM ESCAPING THEIR GRASP”

To help educate youngsters about the dangers of swimming in canals, the Bureau has enlisted the help of a cartoon character who has made quite a splash with the kids:

(otto01 :21)

Hoo, ha, ho! HEY KIDS, OTTO OTTER HERE. COOL WATER IS COOL, BUT PLAYING, SWIMMING OR RUNNING AROUND CANALS AND DITCHES IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD IS NOT. STAY AWAY FROM CANALS AND DITCHES, THE WATER IS FAST, AND DEEP AND DANGEROUS. CANALS AND DITCHES CAN HURT YOU...(music fades)

(steve08 :43)

WE'RE PRETTY PROUD OF OTTO, WE THINK HE'S BEEN AROUND, BEST WE CAN TELL ABOUT 30 YEARS. HE'S ORIGINALLY FROM OUR COLUMBIA BASIN PROJECT IN WASHINGTON, HE STARTED THERE AND THEN WAS EVENTUALLY ADOPTED BY RECLAMATION AS A WHOLE. SO HE'S BEEN THE MAIN CHARACTER IN OUR COLORING BOOKS BOTH IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH AND WE'VE HANDED OUT THOUSANDS OF THOSE COLORING BOOKS TO SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN. OTTO ALSO APPEARS IN PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS, HE ATTENDS FUNCTIONS LIKE OUR CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION AND EARTH DAY AND SIMILAR EVENTS.”

While millions of visitors enjoy Reclamation’s facilities annually, sadly, there is an average of four to five drowning incidents each year. Each of these tragedies could have been prevented by following a few common sense tips along with local regulations:

(steve09 :53)

“BASICLY LEARN HOW TO SWIM. WE'VE FOUND THAT THE IDEAL AGE FOR TEACHING A CHILD TO SWIM IS FOUR, BECAUSE THEY'VE

DEVELOPED TO THE POINT THAT THEY WILL MAINTAIN THE TEACHING THAT YOU'VE PROVIDED THEM. IF YOU'RE NOT A STRONG SWIMMER, CONSIDER WEARING A PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICE IF YOU GO NEAR THE WATER. DIVING IN SHALLOW WATER IS ALSO A GREAT HAZARD SO WE RECOMMEND THAT YOU DO NOT DIVE IN WATER UNTIL IT'S CONFIRMED THAT IT'S AT LEAST NINE FEET DEEP. IF THERE'S A DESIGNATED SWIMMING AREA, YOU SHOULD CONSIDER STAYING IN THAT AREA AS OPPOSED TO BEING EXPOSED TO CURRENTS AND DANGEROUS WATERS. AND IF YOU'RE AN ADULT WHO IS WATCHING OVER CHILDREN AS THEY SWIM OR WADE, YOU MUST PROVIDE YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION. IT IS CERTAINLY A FULL TIME JOB, YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU WILL NOT NECESSAIRLY HEAR A CRY FOR HELP, AND IT CAN ALL BE OVER IN A MINUTE."

Reclamation invites visitors to take advantage of the many recreational opportunities at facilities such as Pueblo Reservoir in Colorado, or the excellent fisheries below Yellowtail Dam in Montana or Kortes Dam in Wyoming. By making water safety an important part of your visit, you and your family can come back and enjoy them year after year.

For more information about recreation in the Great Plains Region, log onto WWW.USBR.GOV/GP.

This podcast was produced by Belongie Entertainment Enterprises for the U-S Bureau of Reclamation, Great Plains Region, Office of Public Affairs.

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Reclamation...Managing Water in the West.