

Guest column: Stay out of irrigation canals

By Mike Britton

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As temperatures heat up across Central Oregon, Central Oregonians and its many visitors will be naturally drawn to the many waterways our region provides. This is also the time of year when our region's network of irrigation canals can look like an enticing opportunity to cool off from the summer heat.

What's the best way to stay safe around our region's vast network of irrigation canals? Simply stay away and keep out. Never swim or play in a canal. While an irrigation canal may appear harmless, they can be extremely dangerous, even for adults and strong swimmers. What's more, entering the water for any reason is illegal.

Just recently a hiker near Smith Rock decided to cool off by "dipping his feet" in a nearby irrigation canal. According to police reports, he slipped and was swept through a nearby tunnel before managing to claw his way out. He was very lucky to walk away with only minor cuts and bruises. The hiker's statement clearly shows how things can go unintentionally wrong in a hurry "I didn't know it was illegal," he said. "I figured it was frowned upon. But we just thought we were dipping our feet in. We didn't want to try to go for a swim or anything." Redmond Fire and Rescue explains, "People shouldn't be in the canal. It's a very dangerous place to be."

Deceptively fast currents, hazardous obstructions and steep concrete-lined or slippery earthen canal banks combine to make irrigation canals unsuitable for water play of any kind.

While everyone should exercise extreme caution near irrigation canals, children are at especially high risk.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, drowning is the leading cause of accidental death nationwide for children 4 and younger, and the second-leading cause of accidental death for youth 14 and younger.

Communicate the dangers of any waterway to children. Close supervision of children near canals is an absolute must. Turning your back even for a moment can be disastrous. Case in point: It took only a minute for a Bend toddler in 2004 to wander away from his mother and slip into a swift-moving canal — ultimately ending in tragedy.

And so you're not faced with putting yourself in danger to rescue a pet, irrigation canals are no place to exercise or recreate with your dog. Like humans, dogs should not be in canals for any reason. Please protect your four-legged family members by keeping them out of the canals. A case in point, in 1997, a 28-year-old man drowned in a canal trying to save his dog.

Several features of irrigation canals combine to make them extremely hazardous.

The water in the narrow channels moves deceptively fast with no obstructions in the waterway to slow it down or to provide visual cues to how fast it's moving.

Deep water in canals may have undertows or turbulence that could pull even the strongest of swimmers under water.

Concrete or earthen sides of ditches have steep, vertical banks making them extremely difficult to grasp or climb.

Irrigation canals contain life-threatening hazards, such as metal grates, culverts, tunnels and spillways.

For the past 18 years irrigation districts has been providing a canal safety program for local schools to educate children on the dangers of canals. Last month irrigation districts kicked off their annual campaign to educate elementary-age youth in classrooms across the region about canal safety. The districts want to share this important message to our children and encourage parents to also discuss with their children the dangers of not just canals but any waterway.

In 2016, our free educational program reached nearly 1,500 second-graders at 15 schools. For more information on how to bring our water safety curriculum to your local classroom, contact Jenny Hartzell-Hill at 541-548-6047.

— Mike Britton is president of the Deschutes Basin Board of Control.