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Corps calls for water and boating safety vigilance as current heat wave results in increased lake visits, decreased lake levels

FORT WORTH, Texas – With the sweltering heat currently experienced throughout the state, many residents are heading to area lakes to cool off and enjoy the recreational aspects associated with the water. While many lake goers are water and boating safety conscious, the Corps continues to receive its fair share of lake visitors who fail to adhere to safe water and boating practices.

The Fort Worth District operates and maintains 25 lakes in Texas which draw an estimated 25 million visitors each year. To date there have been 28 fatalities recorded at Corps managed lakes. This includes eight fatalities in July beginning with the 4th of July weekend where Corps officials launched a water safety campaign for safe water and boating practices.

"I believe that we have more folks at our lakes this year that do not have experience at a lake because many of the local swimming pools are closed due to budget constraints," said Fort Worth District Safety Officer, Madeline Morgan. "To cool off during the hot summer days, these folks are turning to the lakes."

Statistics show that most drowning victims were not wearing personal flotation devices, which could have saved their lives. Many drowning victims never expected to be in the water, and most drown within 10 to 30 feet of safety. "Of all the public fatalities we have recorded over the past 10 years, 95 percent of the victims were not wearing a life jacket," Morgan said.

"Some of our visitors lost their lives by not following state boating laws, such as the requirement that all personal watercraft riders wear a life jacket while underway," said Fort Worth District Commander, Col. Richard J. Muraski. "The bottom line is to always wear a life vest because life vests save lives."

Since drowning is the second leading cause of accidental death in the United States, every member of the family should learn not only to swim but how to swim well. Even good swimmers should never swim alone and then only in designated areas because it is difficult to gauge the bottom of a lake. "A life jacket should be worn by all who are at or near the water because lakes are not like swimming pools where you have a known water depth", said Morgan.

Changing lake levels bring new hazards. Drought conditions throughout the state have brought submerged hazards close to or above the water's surface. At some lakes there are islands that were not there before and changing shore lines. The prudent boat operator must remain vigilant to all hazards.

Lower lake levels also present challenges with stagnant and warmer than normal water temperatures. An amoeba found commonly in all lakes, ponds, rivers or creeks can cause primary amoebic meningoencephalitis or PAM. Health officials believe infections occur when water containing the microorganism is forced into the nasal passages. Therefore, people should not swim, ski, dive or jump into any stagnant water. Officials also stress the use of nose clips when jumping into any body of fresh water.

"We want everyone to have fun and enjoy our facilities, but we want them to be extremely careful and observe safe water and boating practices so they can come back for another visit to our lakes and parks, Morgan said."

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About the Fort Worth District: The Fort Worth District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was established in 1950. The District is responsible for water resources development in two-thirds of Texas, and design and construction at military installations in Texas and parts of Louisiana and New Mexico. Visit the Fort Worth District Web site at: www.swf.usace.army.mil.