

Death highlights canal risk

High voltage pumps, aquatic growth pose serious risks

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An Idaho woman died by electrocution June 30 while cooling off in an irrigation ditch after she touched a pump with faulty wiring.

Canal officials said that type of accident is extremely rare but it's important to warn people about the danger.

Brian Olmstead, general manager of the Twin Falls Canal Co., said his company doesn't let anyone pump out of the system's ditches for safety as well as maintenance reasons.

He said irrigation pumps have very high voltage and can pose a serious risk to someone who doesn't know what they're doing and he urged farmers not to cut corners when it comes to this issue.

"For individual farmers, pumps are always a risk," he said. "They try to be their own electrician ... and may bypass some safety methods a real electrician would use."

According to the Bingham County Sheriff's office, 45-year-old Lisa Warwick of Firth in east Idaho died by electrocution after touching an irrigation pump with faulty wiring while trying to exit the ditch.

Officials from the sheriff's office said she had been working in her yard and had gone to the ditch to cool down. Her body was found in the Snake River Valley Irrigation District ditch about 400 yards away.

Darren Coon, secretary treasurer of the Nampa and Meridian Irrigation District, said that system's 125 pump stations are secured in locked buildings and the company's own operations and maintenance personnel aren't allowed to touch them unless they're fully trained.

While the Firth accident was tragic, he said, the risk of electrocution is another reason why people shouldn't be anywhere near an irrigation canal or ditch.

"There are so many things that can go wrong ... when anyone starts playing around or swimming in a canal," he said.

Pioneer Irrigation District Manager Mark Zirschky said that besides the risk of electrocution, it's possible to get sucked into the intake of a powerful pump. There is also a lot of aquatic growth in canals and some water weeds can reach three feet long, he added.

"If you're swimming in a canal and you get tangled up in that stuff, it can become bad news in a hurry," he said. "For all those reasons -- drowning, electrocution and so forth -- we try our hardest to keep people away from canals."