



Department of Health
Agency of Human Services



Swim Hole Safety Urged to Prevent Drowning Deaths



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BURLINGTON – Sudden summer rain storms can quickly change rivers, tributaries and popular swimming holes in Vermont from safe – to hazardous – to potentially fatal.

With near record heat predicted for the weekend by the National Weather Service, and the record rainfall in May that has swollen waterways around the state, officials are urging caution. Nearly 100 drowning deaths have occurred in Vermont between 1985 and 2012 in natural water settings such as lakes and rivers, including at six popular swimming holes.

“There’s always a risk of drowning while swimming, but if the water is high and fast these swimming holes are far from safe, and everyone should stay away under these conditions,” said Health Commissioner Harry Chen, MD. “As an emergency room physician, I know firsthand the tragedy of drowning, and in most cases these deaths are preventable. Swim holes are one of our cherished natural resources, but we need to better inform people about the serious risks involved.”

For the past several months, a group dedicated to swimming hole safety has been meeting to discuss ways to improve safety and increase awareness about the risks of high water. The group is made up of representatives from the Vermont River Conservancy, the Burlington Legacy Project, Place Creative Company, the Health Department, the Agency of Natural Resources, including the Departments of Environmental Conservation and Forest, Parks and Recreation, Bruce Seifer, and attorneys Mark Kolter, Brian Dunkiel and Ken Schatz.

The group is working to identify causes of drowning deaths and determine actions that could prevent injuries – such as posting warning signs, working with landowners and local businesses near drowning hazards, providing online access to information about river stream flow, with instructions on how to use this information to prevent injuries, developing a public awareness campaign, and enhanced monitoring.

Enacting and enforcing existing laws or policies that could improve safety are also under review.

The six Vermont swimming holes where people have drowned since 1985 are: *Huntington Gorge, Huntington (more than 15 deaths); Jamaica (Cobb Brook – 12 deaths); Bolton Potholes (5 deaths); Dog’s Head Falls, Johnson; Twin Falls, Saxons River, Westminster Hamilton Falls, and Newhaven River, Bristol.*

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