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Public pools safer with mandated drain covers

By DI LEWIS

Standard-Examiner staff dlewis@standard.net

OGDEN — Taking a dip in a public pool just got safer with new drain covers to reduce suction from pool drains.

The changes are part of the federal Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act, named after former Secretary of State James Baker's granddaughter, who died after being trapped at the bottom of a pool by a drain.

Michelle Cooke, Weber-Morgan environmental health program manager, said a state law last year mandated putting either dual drains or an automatic release switch that turns off the drain when a blockage is detected.

Because only public pools had to make the change, Cooke was worried pool owners would be unhappy, but she said she has received only a few complaints about making another change so soon after changes required by a cryptosporidium outbreak.

Last year, public pools had to add equipment to lessen the danger of a parasite that can cause intestinal illnesses.

However, Cooke said, she is still worried about private pools because the regulations are enforceable only at public pools.

About 85 percent of the 167 public pools in Weber and Morgan counties are now in compliance with the regulation, Cooke said.

Davis County Health Department has been working to make sure seasonal and year-round pool operators are aware of the need for additional safety measures, said spokesman Bob Ballew.

"We've known this was coming for quite some time now," Ballew said Wednesday.

"We've been checking to make sure pool and spa operators are already in compliance or at least have a plan to comply soon."

Pool drain suction strength varies depending on the size of the pool, Cooke said, but can have as much as 200 to 300 gallons per minute pouring into it, which can make it impossible for even an adult to pull away from the drain.

People also use spas as pools and swim closer to the bottom in the shallow water, Cooke said, and a swimmer's hair can easily get caught in the drain.

There are many checks already in place to reduce drain suction, such as skimmers around the side of the pool, but the new drain covers add another dimension of safety, she said.

While the drain covers aren't cheap, Cooke said, when considering the benefits, installing one is not that expensive. Private owners should go through an engineer to make sure they get the correct type for their pool, she said.

If owners want to keep the current cover, she said to be sure it is tightly bolted down and that no parts are broken.

Cooke said it's always important to practice general pool safety, too, such as having a 6-foot gated fence around the pool, using chlorine and being able to see the bottom of the pool before jumping in.

Standard-Examiner editor Charlie Pomerleau contributed to this article.