Working up a SWEAT

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Sixth-generation farmers and sisters Sierra and Ellie Scheibner clean the windows of a tractor before the crew begins the wheat harvest on the family farm outside of Athena.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A road crew applies a new layer of asphalt to Southwest Nye Avenue in 2015 in Pendleton.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Hayley Mele-Seibel, 15, watches over the multi-use pool during swim lessons at the Hermiston Family Aquatic Center.

By TAMMY MALGESINI
East Oregonian

As the mercury continues to rise, many people head to the river, the local pool or crank up the air conditioner in order to stay cool. However, many people who work outdoors are left sweating while figuring out ways to beat the heat.

The key — hydration.

The general consensus among employees that are exposed to extreme elements is to make sure people are drinking enough water. This also goes for those who are recreating outdoors or working in their yards.

Jim Forquer, operations chief with Umatilla County Fire District No. 1, said it's important for people to recognize that alcohol isn't a good substitute for fluid intake. In addition to impairing a person's judgment in recognizing possible harm from being in the sun, alcohol can further increase the risk for dehydration.

"Water is the best choice for proper hydration," he said.

Tom Strandberg, the Oregon Department of Transportation Region 5 public information officer, said with dozens of projects going on throughout the summer, the department has several hundred people exposed to the summer heat. In addition to maintenance crews, construction liaisons are out in the sun checking on jobs and contracts.

"It's definitely a topic on our minds," Strandberg said regarding being prepared for working in the heat. "We send out safety reminders with the hot weather."

During the warmer months, Forquer said the first "house chore" of the day is to fill coolers with ice and bottled water so it's ready to go when fire crews are called out. Brandon Artz, recreation supervisor for the city of Hermiston, said lifeguards at Hermiston Family Aquatic Center are provided sunscreen, water and Powerade, a sports drink that replaces electrolytes that are lost through sweating.

Beating the heat

Last week after looking at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration website, Cam McGinnis, the ODOT Region 5 safety lead, drafted an email reminding employees to be prepared for weather-related working conditions.

"Prepare for the heat. Keep an eye out for the shade and the water," he wrote.

McGinnis stressed the importance of staying hydrated, planning for work breaks, appropriate attire and how to recognize the risk for heat-related symptoms. He reminded employees to make sure they have plenty of water, as well as encouraging crews to bring additional water. McGinnis also said wearing a wide-brimmed or floppy hat helps in keeping the sun off a person's neck and head.

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>
> Cam McGinnis, ODOT Region 5 safety lead

Covering exposed skin, said Rebecca Ferge, office manager for Bellinger Farms, is a practice watermelon harvest crews utilize. It reduces their exposure to the sun, while also trapping sweat against the body, which helps in cooling a person down, she said.

"We try really hard for them to be able to take their breaks in whatever shade might be available," Ferge added.

Artz, too, said lifeguards are encouraged to get out of the sun when on their breaks. While they may take a dip in the pool, Artz said they are urged to take cover in the shade or in the air-conditioned lifeguard station.

Another important part of taking preventive action, Forquer said, is a having a good fitness program.

"Our crews work out every day and that assists their ability to work in an environment that exposes them to the extremes," he said.

Many of the harvest workers, Ferge said, are accustomed to working outdoors in the heat. They pack lunch boxes with fluids and food that are replenishing, she said.

"They've acclimatized themselves to the triple digits," she said. "They drink lots of water."

In his email, McGinnis also provided information about phone apps that are helpful. The NIOSH Heat Index, he said, is quite useful in providing important information to determine risk factors.

"Once the location, temperature and humidity are determined, the app rates the conditions and gives you suggestions for mitigation," McGinnis said. "This app also has basic first aid suggestions for heat related illness."

Also, other conditions are factored in at outdoor jobs. For road construction crews, Strandberg said working near or on asphalt and concrete can increase the temperature. Lifeguards have to contend with the sun reflecting off the water. And the heat from flames for firefighters pushes the thermometer even higher.

At floor level, Forquer said a fire in a typical single-family dwelling can result in temperatures of 300-500 degrees. At the ceiling, he said the mercury can climb to 1,200 degrees or even higher. With an awareness of this, Forquer said they have automatic mutual aid response from other agencies that helps in rotating people in to help reduce fatigue. In addition, rehabilitation areas include misters and plenty of water to maintain proper hydration.