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THIS WEEK IS NATIONAL RIP CURRENT AWARENESS WEEK

TALLAHASSEE - Florida Emergency Management officials are reminding residents and visitors that June 6-12, 2010 is National Rip Current Awareness Week. Beachgoers in the Sunshine State are urged to learn about this hazard and ways to stay safe from rip currents this summer.

“Rip currents are a dangerous phenomenon that can be found throughout the year along many of Florida’s beaches,” said David Halstead, director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management. “Rip Current Awareness Week is a perfect opportunity for our residents and visitors to learn about how to identify and protect themselves from this hazard.”

A rip current is a narrow, powerful current of water that runs perpendicular to the beach, out into the ocean. These currents may extend 200 to 2,500 feet (61 to 762 meters) lengthwise, but they are typically less than 30 feet (9 meters) wide. Also, rip currents can often move at more than 5 miles per hour (8 kilometers per hour) or faster and are not always identifiable to the average beachgoer.

“In Florida, rip currents typically kill more people annually than thunderstorms, hurricanes and tornadoes combined, as was the case in 2009,” said State Meteorologist Amy Godsey. “It is important that beachgoers heed the advice of local officials and only swim at lifeguard-protected beaches.”

Rip currents are the number-one concern for beach lifeguards. According to the United States Lifesaving Association, 80 percent of surf beach rescues are attributed to rip currents. The greatest safety precaution that can be taken is to recognize the danger of rip currents and always remember to swim at beaches with lifeguards.

When at the beach:
- Whenever possible, swim at a lifeguard-protected beach.
- Never swim alone.
- Learn how to swim in the surf. It’s not the same as swimming in a pool or lake.
- Be cautious at all times, especially when swimming at unguarded beaches. If in doubt, don’t go out.

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- Obey all instructions and orders from lifeguards. Lifeguards are trained to identify potential hazards. Ask a lifeguard about the conditions before entering the water. This is part of their job.
- Stay at least 100 feet away from piers and jetties. Permanent rip currents often exist alongside these structures. Consider using polarized sunglasses when at the beach.
- They will help you to spot signatures of rip currents by cutting down glare and reflected sunlight off the ocean’s surface.
- Pay especially close attention to children and elderly when at the beach. Even in shallow water, wave action can cause loss of footing.

Identifying a possible rip current:
- A channel of churning, choppy water.
- An area of having a notable difference in water color.
- A line of sea foam, sea weed or other debris moving steadily seaward.
- A break in the incoming wave pattern.

If caught in a rip current:
- Remain calm to conserve energy and think clearly.
- Never fight against the current.
- Think of it like a treadmill that cannot be turned off, which you need to step to the side of.
- Swim out of the current in a direction following the shoreline. When out of the current, swim at an angle--away from the current--towards shore.
- If you are unable to swim out of the rip current, float or calmly tread water. When out of the current, swim towards shore.
- If you are still unable to reach shore, draw attention to yourself by waving your arm and yelling for help.

If you see someone in trouble, don't become a victim too:
- Get help from a lifeguard.
- If a lifeguard is not available, have someone call 9-1-1.
- Throw the rip current victim something that floats--a lifejacket, a cooler, an inflatable ball.
- Yell instructions on how to escape.
- Remember, many people drown while trying to save someone else from a rip current.

Beachgoers who want to learn more about rip currents can visit www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov. For more information on the Florida Division of Emergency Management and to GET A PLAN!, please visit: www.FloridaDisaster.org. Follow us on Twitter at www.Twitter.com/flsertinfo or join our blog at: http://flsertinfo.blogspot.com/.

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