

Navigating Safety: USACE Pittsburgh District's River Ranger Program

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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania known as the Steel City, has transformed from its industrial roots to a vibrant hub centered around its three rivers—especially at “The Point,” where the Ohio, Allegheny, and Monongahela rivers converge. This area attracts diverse crowds for recreational activities like boating, fishing, and scenic cruises, near popular venues like NFL and MLB stadiums and various multi-use land and water trails. These waterways offer countless opportunities, contributing to the local economy and quality of life.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Pittsburgh District (LRP) manages 16 flood control reservoirs and plays a vital role in overseeing the region’s waterways. Pittsburgh’s waterways are essential for recreation and commerce. LRP oversees 23 navigation locks and dams that facilitate the movement of goods and support local industries, making the region a key player in inland navigation. LRP’s focus on safe, sustainable water transportation includes a comprehensive water safety program led by River Rangers, who promote safety, protect natural resources, and engage the community.

Through various outreach efforts, including events, programs, signage, and partnerships with local organizations, the River Rangers have significantly increased public awareness of USACE’s water safety mission. This past year, a team of one permanent and two seasonal staff supported 22 water safety events, partnered with 18 new water safety organizations including an additional 71 co-partners, and made nearly half of the districts more than 100,000 water safety contacts. Their programs have led to a decline in water-related accidents, enhanced community involvement, and improved recreational experiences for visitors.

A highlight of LRP’s water safety efforts was Water Safety Night at PNC Park, held in celebration of National Water Safety Month during the Pittsburgh Pirates' home game on May 11, 2024. The sold-out event showcased the anticipated pitching debut of rookie Paul Skeens and served as a platform to raise water safety awareness, reaching a broad audience beyond usual visitors to USACE projects. A media suite broadcasted stakeholder videos during all 15 home games in May, effectively raising awareness for National Water Safety Month.

Throughout the game, a command presence was established with the LRP District Color Guard, park rangers, and Bobber the Water Safety Dog, creating a festive atmosphere. Attendees received water safety-themed shirts that were provided through a partnership with PNC Park, and park rangers provided interactive displays educating fans about life jackets and safe boating and water safety activities. The event, organized in collaboration with over twenty partner agencies, despite challenging weather conditions, successfully connected with approximately 35,000 fans, promoting water safety.

The LRP’s water safety program is exemplified by the "Know, Take, Wear" campaign, which educates the public about essential water safety practices. This campaign emphasizes knowing potential hazards (Know), taking necessary safety equipment like life jackets (Take), and always wearing them while on or near water (Wear).

With 23 navigation locks and dams within LRP’s footprint, a significant aspect of the River Rangers water safety efforts is educating the public about dangers associated with fixed crest dams. These structures can pose serious risks, especially during changing water conditions. River Rangers raise awareness about

these dangers, ensuring recreational users understand the potential hazards and how to navigate them safely. By informing the public through paddle safety classes, river fests, and lock events, USACE aims to prevent accidents and promote responsible lock use.

Wearing a life jacket is essential, especially for adult males, who account for a significant portion of water-related fatalities. River Rangers target this group to change attitudes toward water safety by promoting the comfort and necessity of modern life jackets. New to their outreach program this year was the "I Got Caught" initiative, to educate the community about life jacket use. In partnership with The Corps Foundation, who received grant funds from the U.S. Coast Guard to purchase and donate insulated lunch bags as rewards for adults who were caught wearing life jackets, effectively encouraging safer behaviors and reducing drowning risks. These items along with donated floating keychains and other water safety supplies quickly became popular along the rivers and drastically improved the life jacket wear rate during the locking through process.

The USACE Pittsburgh District's water safety program, supported by the River Ranger initiative, reflects a strong commitment to community education and safety. Through events like Water Safety Night at PNC Park, the "Know, Take, Wear" campaign, and ongoing efforts targeting adult males, the Pittsburgh District fosters a culture of safety on the water ensuring everyone can enjoy the region's waterways safely. These initiatives protect lives and underscore the essential role these waterways play in the community's economy and recreation.