

## **Water Safety Project Spotlight**

### **Down In The Valley: Portland District's Willamette Valley Project Shines Even When It Rains**

**By: Tana Wilson, NWD/POD Representative on National Water Safety Committee**

Like many USACE Projects across the country, Willamette Valley in Cottage Grove, Oregon had a bustling recreation season. When the sun shines in the Pacific Northwest, people are soaking it up, and that usually means bumper to bumper traffic with cars outfitted with kayak racks, stand up paddleboards, boat trailers and other water-related gear headed for one of the 13 lakes that make up the Willamette Valley Project.

A study published in the journal *Land* examined how outdoor recreation has changed as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Results indicated that nearly half of adults from across the United States now participate in outdoor recreation on at least a monthly basis, and approximately 20 percent may be new to outdoor recreation because of the pandemic. With more visitors comes the need for more education— especially for those new to water activities.

Armed with water safety facts and materials, the Willamette Valley NRM team was ready to save lives by helping keep people safe when on, in, or near the water. They also supplemented what the National Water Safety Program has provided with some of their own water safety promotional items including a chip clip that says, "Clip It For Life."

Nothing quite says summer like baseball. Although not a game typically played in the water, Bobber the Water Safety Dog was invited to an Emerald's baseball game in Eugene, Oregon. Bobber and Park Ranger Paige King greeted over 3,000 fans of all ages with water safety messages. Bobber even got to hit a piñata during the 7th inning stretch while his water safety slogan, "Life Jackets: Man's Vest Friend" was shared on the big screen.

A different kind of game of catch, Willamette Valley Park Rangers also participated in the "I Got Caught" initiative. They successfully caught 50 adults wearing life jackets. Adult visitors caught wearing their life jackets received dry bags. The dry bags were purchased by the Corps Foundation using grant funds they received from the U.S. Coast Guard and then donated to the National Water Safety Program to distribute to USACE projects. "Most everybody we talked to accepted a dry bag and were excited, even for a photo op," said Ranger King.

The nature of the Valley means the recreation season is relatively short (mid-May through mid-September), but it is unceasing while underway. The Willamette Valley had two public recreation fatalities between April and August, both occurred while swimming. Neither one of the victims were wearing a life jacket. It is unfortunate that the fatalities occurred and the Willamette Valley continued on with their water safety outreach even stronger than before. Rangers made valuable visitor contacts with people of all ages and through their efforts uncountable lives were saved.

As the Valley enters the rainy season, Park Ranger King is already thinking about what's next on the water safety outreach docket. "We are headed to the Eugene Boat Show in February," King said. "And it's a great opportunity geared for adult water safety outreach."