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River-related emergencies on the rise, fire officials warn
Benton County Fire District 4 urges caution as summer heats up

WEST RICHLAND, Wash. – As temperatures climb and more people head to the water, Benton County Fire District 4 is issuing a warning: emergency calls to local rivers are already spiking—and the most active weeks of summer are still ahead.

“We have already had an abnormally high number of emergency responses to the river this year,” said Fire Chief Paul Carlyle. “Even shallow or slow-moving water can be deceptively dangerous and take people by surprise.”

The Columbia and Yakima Rivers may look calm on the surface, but they often conceal strong currents, cold temperatures, and underwater hazards that can overwhelm even experienced swimmers. Local firefighters are urging residents to take extra precautions and respect the risks that come with open water.

Close supervision is critical—especially when children are involved. Drowning happens quickly and quietly, and distractions can be deadly. Adults are also encouraged to avoid swimming alone. The buddy system ensures help is nearby if something goes wrong.

Drinking alcohol while swimming, boating, or supervising others significantly increases the risk of accidents. Impaired coordination and judgment can turn a fun day into a medical emergency in seconds.

One of the most effective ways to prevent drowning is to wear a life jacket whenever you’re boating, paddleboarding, or spending time near open water. Life jackets save lives—and with Benton County Fire District 4’s loaner program, there’s no excuse to go unprepared.

The District offers free access to properly fitted life jackets for both children and adults. Community members can stop by Station 420 at 2604 Bombing Range Road in West Richland to borrow one, or call 509-967-2945 to arrange a pickup time.

Drowning remains one of the leading causes of accidental death in Washington—but it's also one of the most preventable. With extra caution and the right equipment, families can enjoy our rivers and return home safely.

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Benton County Fire District 4 provides fire and emergency medical service to approximately 25,000 people over 52 square miles. While the service area includes the city of West Richland and its immediate unincorporated areas, BCFD4 is a separate taxing district. BCFD4 firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and paramedics respond to an average of 2,200 calls annually, over two-thirds of which are EMS-related. Visit www.bcf4.org.