

Cedar City to host annual water festival Saturday, with renewed focus on conservation and youth

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St. George Spectrum & Daily News



Don't expect water balloon fights or a fire truck spraying a cooling mist at this year's Cedar City Water Festival.

This Saturday, the Central Iron County Water Conservancy District (CICWCD) is getting serious about water conservation at the event, which is slated for 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Cedar City's Main Street Park.

"This year we've decided, especially with this extreme drought that we're not going to do the fire truck and all the water activities, that we're going to change it up and try to use less water," said Jessica Staheli, CICWCD's Public Outreach and Conservation Manager.

"We're going to do a foam slip-and-slide instead of a fire truck. And we're going to do a beach volleyball game and some more inflatables."

Utah, as well as most of the southwest, has been locked in the grips of a record-breaking 20-year drought. The U.S. Drought Monitor currently classifies 90% of the state as being in "extreme drought" status and southern Utah as being in "exceptional drought" status. The agency, a branch of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), also recently reported that the "most intense period of drought" in the history of its monitoring conditions in Utah occurred earlier this year, with little improvement since.

In March, Utah Gov. Spencer Cox responded to the drought emergency by asking residents to reduce water use, specifically in showers and on lawns. Water managers throughout the state and across the seven-state Colorado River Basin are also pursuing various projects, many with legally complicated and uncertain paths, to import water to their regions from outside sources in an attempt to stave off myriad consequences of dry soils and withering fields. Effects of the lack of moisture are being felt especially acutely this week as a historic and dangerous heatwave persists across the west.

In addition to raising awareness about drought conditions, Saturday's water festival will feature educational booths designed to help Cedar City residents understand what options are available to reduce their water use at home. These include free water checks to evaluate whether you're overwatering your lawn as well as information on smart irrigators, water efficiency rebates and how to modify your landscaping to include more water-wise plants. If you can't make it to this year's event, information on these programs is also available on the CICWCD's conservation webpage.



If the booths and the volleyball and the foam slip-and-slide aren't enough to get you out to Main Street Park this Saturday, the CICWCD says it has also ordered 2000 hot dogs for the event, up from last year's 1500. Due to Iron County's increased population growth and heightened local concerns about the drought, they expect to see a larger turnout than in past years, and they're hoping to use the opportunity to reach both adults who can make water-conserving changes right now and kids who will carry water-wise practices into the future.

"I would say our target is [both] kids and adults," Staheli said. "We include games for kids and then hopefully the parents come out and learn about water because the adults are the ones who are going to be able to help with the water issues."

CICWCD General Manager Paul Monroe said he feels that the water festival adds to the district's efforts to educate Iron County youth about water, which include influencing a 5th grade water curriculum and hosting a field trip and water trivia contest that ends with a pizza party for the winning class. With Cedar City Valley's underground aquifer dropping, its ground surface sinking and its soils drier than ever before, Iron County's ability to continue to grow and thrive will depend on water-wise students growing up into water-wise adults.

"It's just easier to teach conservation and sustainable water usage and sustainable lifestyles at that younger age," Monroe said. "It seems like kids grasp onto that more than us old folks. And so I guess that's why it's still kind of our primary focus, because kids will react and be able to talk to their parents or keep the conversation going at their homes, with how they can continue to [have] an impact with water [conservation]."

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