

Drain cover recall may close many public pools

By Patricia Callahan Tribune staff reporter

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Thousands of pools around the country may not be able open in time for the Memorial Day holiday because federal regulators say they will need to replace faulty safety equipment that can lead to swimmers getting trapped underwater and drowning.

In announcing the recall of 1 million pool and spa drain covers, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission set off waves of frustration among pool owners and operators who installed this safety equipment in recent years to address a deadly entrapment hazard that federal regulators now say these covers can fail to prevent.

A Tribune investigation in February exposed how pool drain covers underwent flawed safety evaluations and failed subsequent, more stringent tests. The newspaper's investigation spotlighted a confidential report in which witnesses to faulty tests at a major national laboratory concluded some pool drain covers certified there "could result in serious injuries and or death." The safety agency, known as the CPSC, had fielded safety complaints about the drain covers for more than two years but didn't launch an investigation until last July.

Without proper covers, pool and spa drains can act like supercharged vacuum cleaners, trapping people under water with hundreds of pounds of suction force.

Although many of the drain covers themselves are not very expensive, hiring a pool professional to replace or retrofit them can cost hundreds of dollars. Federal regulators did not want consumers who shelled out \$20 for a defective drain cover to be on the hook for the installation fees, and under the terms of the recall that labor will be covered by the manufacturers.

In remarks prepared for a Thursday press conference, CPSC Chairman Inez Tenenbaum planned to say: "I know this is a very difficult message for many communities to hear so close to Memorial Day weekend, but we cannot risk a child becoming entrapped in a recalled drain cover."

Tenenbaum also planned to say she was obliged to advise that public pools and spas close if they need to have drain covers replaced or fixed. "They should reopen as soon as the work is

completed that addresses the recall and brings the facility into compliance with the law," her prepared remarks stated.

The recall includes dozens of models made by eight manufacturers -- A and A Manufacturing, AquaStar Pool Products, Color Match Pool Fittings, Custom Molded Products, Hayward Pool Products, Pentair Water Pool and Spa, Rising Dragon and Waterway Plastics.

Larger pools with multiple drains or gravity drainage systems will not need to close, the CPSC said. But those with a single main drain will need to close if their drain cover is slated for replacement under the recall.

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