

Iowa Farmer Today

Safety Watch: Pond safety starts with limiting access

By Tabitha Kuehn

Aug 11, 2024



Proper signage, water quality and access restrictions are keys to a safe farm pond.

Photo courtesy Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health

Farm ponds can be the setting for many cherished memories. I have spent hot summer days fishing, cold winter days ice skating and fall nights huddled around a campfire by the water.

Beyond recreation, farm ponds are also an essential part of many farming operations.

Iowa's landscape is dotted with numerous farm ponds, and rural Iowans often work and recreate around these areas.

Safety should be a top priority when living, working and playing around these bodies of water. In fact, water safety should be observed around all types of agricultural water, including ponds, irrigation ditches, livestock water tanks, streams and pools.

Farm pond access should be restricted to limit liability and risk. Secure fences and gates around pond areas are essential for keeping people and livestock out. Gates should be lockable and remain locked when not in use.

Only those with permission from the pond owner should enter the pond area, and it is important for them to inform someone of their plans to work or recreate near the water.

Proper signage is another important step to enhance pond safety and reduce liability risks. Pond areas should be marked with "No Trespassing" or "Keep Out" signs, and danger signs should be posted near the water.

If certain recreational activities are prohibited, such as swimming or fishing, signs should clearly indicate these restrictions. If the pond is

used for recreational swimming, specific hazards should be marked with signs such as “Shallow Water” or “Pipe Intake.”

When a pond is used for swimming or boating, it is important participants are strong swimmers. Life jackets should be worn by children and inexperienced swimmers.

When boating, there should be an approved life jacket or preserver on board for each person.

Starting children in swim lessons early is a great way to teach water safety and reduce the risk of drowning. Learning to roll onto their back and breathe can be a lifesaving skill if the child enters the water unexpectedly.

Even after swimming lessons and demonstrated swimming capabilities, children fishing, swimming or recreating at a farm pond should always be closely monitored by an adult.

Adults should also never enter the water alone. Even experienced swimmers are susceptible to the dangers of water.

Rescue stations should be placed in convenient locations near the water. These stations should be equipped with a life preserver ring and a rope that can be utilized in case of an emergency.

Of course, farm ponds are used for recreation in winter months, too. Even though cold weather seems far away in these dog days of summer, I can't talk about farm pond safety and skip over ice.

Venturing onto a frozen pond can be extremely dangerous, as drowning risks persist and cold water and air temperatures can cause additional issues. Be sure to test ice thickness by drilling holes in multiple areas before walking, ice skating or ice fishing. Ice needs to

be at least 4 inches thick to safely support an adult, and 5 to 7 inches thick to support ATVs or snowmobiles.

Farm ponds should only be used for recreational activities if the water quality has been tested and meets standards for human use. Livestock ponds should never be used for human activities.

Also, be cautious of ponds with a foul smell or large visible algal blooms or cloudy water.

Ponds used for human recreation should be routinely tested for E. coli. Testing for nitrates, nitrites and pH should also be done prior to swimming. You can check these levels with either at-home test kits or laboratory tests. If using at-home tests, follow the test procedures carefully to obtain the most accurate results.

Ensuring the safety of farm ponds is crucial for the well-being of everyone on the property. By implementing proper barriers, regularly inspecting water quality and educating users about potential hazards, we can reduce the risks associated with farm ponds.

These safety measures can save lives and help everyone create farm pond memories that they can look back on fondly, just as I do!

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