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TDEC IMPLEMENTS COMPREHENSIVE SAFETY IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY AT CUMMINS FALLS STATE PARK, WILL REOPEN FALLS AND GORGE AUGUST 14

NASHVILLE – The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation has implemented a comprehensive safety improvement strategy at Cummins Falls State Park and will reopen the falls and gorge on Aug. 14 if weather conditions permit.

The additions will include new policies for minors, additional signage, additional safety-related information on the Cummins Falls State Park webpage, a safety education video for public viewing at the park, real-time weather monitoring, water monitoring, refuge areas in case of an evacuation and increased personnel.

“We are glad to be in a position to reopen Cummins Falls with added enhanced safety tools and procedures that we are putting into place,” TDEC Deputy Commissioner Jim Bryson said. “This area is an extremely rugged area in a dynamic watershed that will never be completely risk free, and the best way to enhance safety is to take a comprehensive approach, and in this case that means new policies, educational tools and wet-weather protocols for our visitors.”

Three new policies are being added regarding access to the gorge and falls:

- Each child 12 and under must be accompanied by an adult.
- Each child 12 and under must have a life jacket.
- Each child 12 and under must wear the life jacket when swimming.

TDEC also encourages children ages five and under to not enter the falls and gorge areas.

Signage at the trailhead and in the gorge area in English and Spanish will warn of the dangers of flash flooding and provide instructions in the event of a flood. The Cummins Falls State Park webpage will include an informative pop-up that will alert prospective visitors to the potential dangers and strenuous nature of the falls and the hike into the falls. A temporary visitor center has been erected over the trail leading to the falls. It is equipped with two 70-inch monitors playing a safety video on loop as visitors prepare to enter the trail.

A weather monitoring station at the park now serves as the central hub for weather monitoring efforts. Located adjacent to the trailhead, park staff will monitor watershed-specific radar during park operating hours.

“Park staff will evacuate the gorge when radar indicates rain anywhere in the watershed, not just the park itself,” Bryson said. “This is the most conservative and appropriate protocol at this time.”

In coordination with Tennessee Tech University, three river monitoring gauges have been installed on tributaries upstream from the falls to measure water levels. These gauges will send texts and email alerts to all Cummins Falls park staff when water levels rise significantly. The alerts will also be sent to two local 911 emergency response centers.

The monitoring gauges have been installed and TDEC has been reviewing the data to better understand the dynamics of the watershed. The system will become predictive over time, but more data is needed.

“At this time, we are not comfortable with the monitoring data itself being the first mechanism to warn visitors of an influx of water into the gorge,” Bryson said. “We will use the data we are collecting as a secondary layer of safety until the system becomes more predictive.”

If the park is evacuated, three refuge areas located above all known flood levels have been cleared of brush and clearly marked. These areas provide easy access to high ground where visitors can seek refuge until they are evacuated or the water recedes.

The park is adding at least two seasonal employees to assist with managing crowds at the park and assist with weather monitoring, visitor education and visitor safety.

“I am pleased with the comprehensive approach and due diligence TDEC has put in to make the park safer for our citizens,” State Rep. Ryan Williams, R-Cookeville, said. “Cummins Falls is a world-class recreational destination, but safety will continue to be top priority.”

“We asked TDEC to step up its game in terms of safety at Cummins Falls, and they have delivered,” State Sen. Paul Bailey, R-Sparta, said. “I encourage anyone in my district who visits Cummins Falls to please review all safety information provided and take guidance from park rangers very seriously.”

“TDEC has taken several additional measures to enhance safety at Cummins Falls,” State Rep. John Mark Windle, D-Livingston, said. “Cummins Falls is a beautiful place, but people should continue to put safety first when they visit.”

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