National Media Release
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NATIONAL DROWNING TOLL AT EIGHT YEAR HIGH

123 people drowned in New Zealand during 2011, up 41% on the previous year and the worst annual drowning toll on record since 2003. A significant 80% of those that died were men.

Water Safety New Zealand (WSNZ) – which released the figures – say the toll is also well up on the five year average of 111 deaths by drowning per annum.

WSNZ chief executive Matt Claridge says an increase of such magnitude is extremely disappointing.

“To go from a record low in 2010 to an eight year high in 2011 is a tragedy and we will continue to do everything we can to inform and educate people about water safety to ensure 2012 is a better year.”

Mr Claridge says it’s difficult to determine the reason for 2011’s high toll but that New Zealand has an ongoing issue with a casual attitude to water safety.

“Many of the drownings that occurred during recreational activities could have been prevented if people remembered the safety basics. Wear life jackets, check the weather forecast, stay within your limits, don’t swim alone and avoid alcohol. These and other simple precautions could save your life.”

In 2011 there were 66 recreational* drownings (54% of total 2011 toll), 24 non-recreational** drownings (20% of total 2011 toll) and 30 drownings recorded as other activities*** (24% of total 2011 toll). There were also three unknown/unclassified fatal incidents.

Of the recreational drownings the largest number of deaths occurred while swimming (17) scuba diving and snorkeling (13) and shore-based fishing and power boating (both 11).

Children featured prominently in the 2011 statistics. Fourteen pre-schoolers (aged under five) drowned – this is the highest number since 2002 and up 75% on the five year average.

Matt Claridge says the high proportion of young children that drowned is a tragedy for the nation.

“Young children are extremely vulnerable around water and caregivers need to be reminded to provide active supervision – that is, keep the child within arms reach at all times.”

Matt Claridge says 2011 also saw a significant jump in the number of people of Asian descent drowning with eighteen deaths - three times the average number recorded for this group between 2006 and 2010.

“This is another priority area for Water Safety New Zealand in 2012 and we’re in the final stages of developing an education campaign specifically targeting people of Asian origin.”

Mr Claridge says he’d like to see water safety high on people’s lists of New Year’s resolutions.

“2012 is already off to a poor start with 15 drownings so far this year. I’m calling on all New Zealanders to make water safety a priority. Refresh yourself on the safety basics and if you – or family members - can’t swim, start learning now.”

Other National 2011 Statistics

- Beaches (with 29 deaths) overtook historical danger spot rivers (27 deaths) as the most common place for a drowning to occur.
- Maori continue to be over represented in drowning statistics. 24 Maori drowned in 2011. This is 20% of the total number of drowning victims, yet Maori make up 15% of the population.
- Nine regions – Northland, Auckland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Gisborne, Tasman, Marlborough, Canterbury and Southland – had an increased number of drownings when compared with 2010.

Drowning is the third highest cause of accidental death in New Zealand, behind road vehicle crashes and falls.

ENDS

When recording and analysing data regarding activity at the time of death, WSNZ classifies drowning incidents into one of three categories – Recreational, Non-Recreational and Other.

- *Recreational drowning is where the person intended to be in the water for recreational purposes, e.g. fishing, sailing, swimming and diving.
- **Non-recreational drowning is where the person had no intention of being in the water immersion incidents and occupation related drowning.
- ***Other includes suicide, homicide and road vehicle incidents.

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WATER SAFETY NEW ZEALAND

Water Safety New Zealand (WSNZ) is the national organisation responsible for water safety education.

Formed in 1949, WSNZ'soverarching goal is to prevent drownings by educating communities about water safety.

A priority for WSNZ is to address a steady decline in the swimming ability of New Zealand's youth. The Sealord Swim For Life initiative, a key WSNZ programme, is a national project established to:

- Provide all children with access to the water;
- Facilitate the delivery of quality swim and survive programmes in primary schools;
- Foster a culture that produces generations of New Zealand families that are water safe.