

Swan Lakers step up effort to clean area waters, land

By **BROOKE ANDRUS/Bigfork Eagle** | **Posted: Thursday, October 13, 2011 2:00 am**

Like many lakes in Northwest Montana, Swan Lake is known for its pristine water conditions, and Hugh Corn would like to keep it that way.

Corn is the president of the Swan Lakers, a community service organization dedicated to protecting the water quality and other natural resources of Swan Lake and the surrounding area.

The group has recently become involved with efforts to monitor water conditions in the lake and prevent aquatic invasive species from damaging its ecosystem.

The water-testing project, which Corn likens to "giving the lake an annual physical," began last year and was funded primarily by Kootenai Lodge Estates. Sampling and analysis were provided by the Whitefish Lake Institute.

"There was never really a baseline measurement of the quality of water in Swan Lake, and as the lake develops and as the rivers upstream develop — which they will — it's good to know where we are now so that if the water quality does begin to change, we can better identify why it's changing," Corn said.

During the first round of testing in 2010, water sampling was conducted at three different times throughout the year. This year, the Swan Ecosystem Center provided funding for additional water chemistry samples to be taken and processed in order to determine the changes in water quality since last year.

"There are a lot of things that can affect the quality of the water," Corn said. "For example, there are a lot of old septic systems in some of the older places around Swan Lake, and those things don't last forever."

In addition to checking the water for the presence of harmful chemicals, the tests measure the level of dissolved oxygen in the water, which Corn said plays a crucial role in the lake's ability to support a healthy wildlife habitat.

As the issue of invasive species of aquatic weeds has become increasingly important to the health of Flathead Lake, the Swan Lakers have also become involved in the effort to prevent other bodies of water — including Swan Lake — from suffering the potentially devastating consequences of the introduction of such organisms.

"We're concerned about them being in Flathead Lake but also spreading to other bodies of water in the area," Corn said. "There were some boat check stations set up in the area this year, and

there's going to have to be a lot more of that."

According to Corn, many members of the Swan Lakers plan to volunteer their time to help Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks set up more check points.

"We will have to go to training, but then we can work with officials from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks as volunteer assistants," Corn said. "They don't have the resources to do inspections in all of the areas they need to."

Since the Flathead Valley is a popular vacation destination, many people using its waters are not familiar with the issue of invasive species.

"We are blessed in this part of the state with lots of water, but that means they (lakes and rivers) attract all kinds of boats from all kinds of places," Corn said.

According to Corn, the Swan Lakers will begin their volunteer training sometime next spring.

In the meantime, the group will host its annual fall highway clean-up starting at 10 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 15. Community members who would like to lend a hand to the effort should meet at the Ferndale Market. Garbage bags and vests will be provided.

For more information on the Swan Lakers, visit www.swanlakers.org.