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Matt Baldwin / Whitefish Pilot

Two people in kayaks enter a placid Whitefish Lake at City Beach on April 3. Temperatures climbed to near 70 over the weekend.

Institute says apathy threatening health of lake

By HEIDI DESCH
Whitefish Pilot

The Whitefish Lake Institute is issuing a warning about protecting the future of Whitefish Lake.

"The most critical concern facing the lake is apathy," Lori Curtis said. "Water quality is complicated, but the lake is not. Participation is what will keep the lake from going south."

Curtis, science and education director for WLI, says it's important for folks to ask questions and get involved with protecting and improving lake quality.

WLI last month held an information session about the organization's water resources report. About 40 people attended the event at the O'Shaughnessy Center.

WLI last fall released its report, A Status of the Whitefish Lake Watershed and Surrounding Area. The 336-page document brings together all the data collected by WLI and other agencies to paint a picture of the health of the watershed, which includes Whitefish Lake and generally the water from creeks, rivers and other lakes that bring water in and out of Whitefish Lake.

Mike Koopal, executive director for WLI, says he doesn't know how much time Whitefish Lake has before it could become worse, but what he does know is that humans have already had a big impact on the lake.

See Lake, A4

Lake

from A1

"If you look at the lake today compared to it's history," he said. "We've been around 1 percent of that history and look at the impact we've had on it. It's our responsibility to take action. What we do now will have an impact.

The report provides baseline knowledge, identifies known and potential concerns, and offers recommendations to organizations responsible for the health of the watershed. The report indicates that Whitefish Lake is at a tipping point in trophic transition, meaning the lake could be heading in the direction of poorer water quality.

Koopal said there's no one source of contamination happening in the watershed, like a pipe that could be plugged, instead it will take small, cumulative projects to improve the water quality.

"It's not sexy," he said. "It's just something we have to go after doggedly over time."

Mayor John Muhlfeld lauded the report noting that it points out that Whitefish Lake is at a tipping point in terms of water quality.

"Whitefish Lake is one of the greatest gems in Whitefish," he said. "We have the opportunity to do something or turn our backs. I guarantee we will regret it if we turn our backs."

WLI has conducted monitoring and field data collection on Whitefish Lake and its tributaries since 2007, accruing data to report the baseline scientific understanding of the lake and water quality. The project area in the report includes just over 100,000 acres encompassing the Whitefish Lake watershed and the Upper Whitefish River watershed.

"Longterm conservation requires a baseline," Curtis said of the report. "This is a basis to make more informed resource management decisions."

There are a number of key indicators that show the lake is transitioning from a low level of nutrients, which is good for a lake like Whitefish Lake, toward a medium amount of nutrients, according to Koopal.

Data shows that changes in the lake could result in increased algal production, decreased water clarity, and decreased dissolved oxygen levels impacting aquatic species, the report notes.

Human activity has increased the levels of nutrients reaching water bodies, the report states. The main sources of this is municipal and industrial waste, and agricultural, domestic and industrial run-off, stormwater and septic system leaching.

Of particular concern is the phosphorus loading in Whitefish Lake because it can promote excessive plant growth that favors algae, eventually affecting water quality. The main sources of phosphates and nitrates tend to come from improperly managed agricultural, domestic and industrial run-off, and septic and sewer systems, according to the report.

"Lakes are very dynamic," Koopal said. "They look calm on the surface, but there's a lot going on there."

Koopal said it will take a number of projects working throughout the watershed to improve water quality. He pointed to two top items to address — septic leachate entering Whitefish Lake and restoration of Cow Creek.

In 2012, WLI released a study that confirmed septic contamination in Whitefish Lake. The study found contamination at City Beach bay, at Viking Creek and Lazy Bay, and recommended further investigation to replace aging septic systems.

"There are a lot of things that are not in our control," he said. "But septic leachate is something we can control. It's been studied and the science hasn't been questioned, now it becomes a social issue and takes community involvement for a solution."

Cow Creek, which is a tributary of the Whitefish River about four miles downstream of Whitefish Lake, has been degraded due to grazing pressure, channel alteration and development, according to the report. The result has been streambank erosion, weed encroachment and associate sediment and nutrient loading.

"For Cow Creek, with a couple more years of data, the state could list this as an impaired water body," he said.

Koopal said WLI plans to begin working with students from Whitefish schools on a restoration projects that would involve planting vegetation along the creek.

For more information on the watershed report, visit www.whitefishlake.org.