

Boat inspection efforts ramped up at City Beach

By HEIDI DESCH Whitefish Pilot | Posted: Tuesday, July 22, 2014 5:15 pm

Boaters using the City Beach boat ramp this summer must undergo an Aquatic Invasive Species inspection of their craft before launching into Whitefish Lake.

City Parks and Recreation staff provide a visual inspection of the boat and trailer, and also ask a few questions of the owner before clearing the boat to launch. It's part of continued efforts to prevent AIS from entering the lake.

"This is helping to protect the resource," Josh Gubits, environmental scientist with Whitefish Lake Institute, said. "Most boats are pretty clean, but it could only take one boat to bring something in that we don't want here."

This is the fourth year recreation staff have been trained to identify aquatic invasive species. The city is in its second year of contracting with WLI to implement an AIS inspection program at City Beach. Last summer an WLI intern performed inspections on weekends and this year efforts have stepped up as recreation staff inspect boats and survey boat owners seven days per week.

"The goal is two-fold — to figure out the risk to Whitefish Lake and to collect data on who is using the lake and where they are coming from," Gubits said.

Aquatic invasive species, including non-native plant, fish, mussels and clams, have become an increasing concern for the negative impacts they can have on lakes and rivers. In 2012 Boats set to launch into Whitefish Lake were found to have zebra mussel fragments, and in 2011 Eurasian watermilfoil was discovered in Beaver Lake.

Species of concern include zebra mussels, Eurasian watermilfoil, curly-leaf pondweed and flowering rush, according to Gubits.

City Beach staff has been given in-depth training about AIS, and Gubits works with staff on the weekends assisting with inspections. Employees are trained to look for anything encrusted or vegetation on the boat.

If anything suspect is found, the owner is instructed to leave City Beach, wash the boat and return for re-inspection. Staff also contacts WLI and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks is contacted to warn that a dirty boat may try to enter the lake at another launch.

In addition to a visual inspection, for the first time this summer staff is collecting data as part of an inspection log. Information gathered includes the date, time of day, vehicle license plate number, state or province, type of watercraft, last water body the boat was launched in and whether or not the boat has been through an inspection station this year.

“This is a way to understand the risk of Aquatic Invasive Species getting into Whitefish Lake,” Gubits said. “There are lots of states that would be considered high risk because they have mussels. Employees are looking for high risk boats.”

Most of the boats launched at City Beach seemed to be returning to Whitefish Lake or coming from Flathead Lake. Still, the inspection station has already checked a boat that previously entered Colorado’s Lake Mead where quagga and zebra mussels have both been found.

The data will be used to generate a report for the city and will provide information on where boaters are coming from, how many times individual boats launch and what types of boats are most commonly used on Whitefish Lake. It’s not unusual on a Saturday for 30 boats to launch at City Beach.

“Those lines can get long,” Gubits said. “Most people have been very thankful and that’s nice because that means people care about our resource.”