

Whitefish Pilot

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City updates invasive regs to match state

By HEIDI DESCH
Whitefish Pilot

The city of Whitefish has updated its aquatic invasive species regulations to better coincide with state rules.

Whitefish in May began requiring inspections of all boats entering Whitefish Lake at State Park and City Beach. However, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks received calls from concerned boaters regarding the city's invasive species program.

At the center of the issue was the city's decontamination protocol, which originally said that all high risk watercraft must undergo decontamination and pay a fee. Whitefish Lake Institute was charging boaters for use of its decontamination station.

City Council on July 17 approved an update to its AIS ordinance created by city and state officials to

"They suggested minor changes to our AIS ordinance," City Attorney Angela Jacobs said of the state.

When asked about how boaters react to being told they must go through decontamination, Parks and Recreation Director Maria Butts said education is key to explaining the need for decontamination of boats.

"The majority have been receptive," Butts said. "By the time they get to the decontamination station most understand why they have to do it."

Boats that are considered high risk can be required to go through decontamination before launching including those with ballast tanks that have not been out of the water for 30 days, those that have been in a mussel-infested waterway in the last 30 days, those with unverified standing water and those that are deemed too dirty to inspect.

City Council also approved an agreement with the state to operate the city watercraft inspection stations at City Beach and State Park under protocols established by the

AIS

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The Montana Invasive Species Act allows the state to authorize another entity to operate an inspection station if the entity agrees to conditions of an agreement established by both parties and to rules adopted by the state.

"We always planned to enter into a [memorandum of understanding] with the state for the station at State Park," explained Jacobs. "The agreement means that we will use the FWP protocol and sets out the program protocols as created by WLI and the city."

The agreement, for example, lays out the procedures that says the city will contact the state if it finds an AIS and that the state will alert the city if it knows a mussel-fouled watercraft is headed to the city-operated stations.

"This update to the AIS plan for Whitefish Lake will extend the reach of our AIS prevention program, aligns the plan with state protocols and addresses local needs," said Thomas Woolf, FWP AIS bureau

chief. "We're grateful for the partnership with WLI and the city of Whitefish."

The Whitefish program calls for mandatory inspection of all watercraft prior to launch with no fee for inspection, mandatory decontamination for all high risk watercraft with no fee, but donations accepted, watercraft with an inspection or decontamination seal from the state or other agencies are subject only to a brief inspection interview at the stations and watercraft found to be mussel-fouled will be turned over to FWP and not allowed to launch into Whitefish Lake.

Both inspection stations are staffed by trained inspectors who perform inspections, but also work to inform the public about the threat of AIS.

"We appreciate the patience and cooperation of lake visitors as we implement program updates," said Carla Belski, community services coordinator for city Parks and Recreation. "Watercraft users at both City Beach and Whitefish State Park have been very supportive of the program to date."

Zebra mussels were first found in Montana in late 2016 east of the Continental Divide. The state's plan for AIS prevention focuses on perimeter inspections stations augmented by stations along the Divide.

WLI this spring recommended an aggressive local plan to combat the zebra mussel threat. The local plan is not 100 percent effective in elim-

inating the threat and the public needs to be an active participant, WLI notes.

"The robust local plan that was developed from project partners working together means that

Whitefish Lake has a very strong layer of protection against the zebra mussel threat," said Mike Koopal, executive director of the WLI.

A zebra mussel colonization of Whitefish Lake

could have negative economic and environmental consequences, Koopal has said.

The city in 2013 began funding and implementing an annual AIS management plan.