

Whitefish Pilot

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AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES

Mandatory boat inspections begin for lake

By HEIDI DESCH
Whitefish Pilot

Beginning Monday all watercraft entering Whitefish Lake will have to undergo an aquatic invasive species inspection prior to launch.

The new inspection requirement is part of a larger AIS management program — Our Lake, Our Future — being implemented for the first time this season on Whitefish Lake with the goal of preventing the transfer of AIS into the lake and surrounding water bodies.

The city of Whitefish, Whitefish Lake Institute and Montana State Parks have partnered together to create the new program.

Whitefish's program is likely the most comprehensive such program in the state, according to Lori Curtis with the Whitefish Lake Institute.

"We're proud of this robust protection program with a small lake, in a small city, this is a big program," she said.

Efforts to reduce the risk of AIS

OUR LAKE OUR FUTURE

Whitefish Lake Aquatic Invasive Species Management Program

spreading through Montana have increased following the positive detection last fall of zebra mussels in Tiber Reservoir. Samples from Canyon Ferry and the Milk River and Missouri River have also turned up suspect results.

The city of Whitefish earlier this

month passed an ordinance that requires all boats to be inspected or for high-risk watercraft to be decontaminated prior to launch. Those launching without an inspection could be charged with a misdemeanor or issued a municipal infraction.

Two watercraft inspection stations will operate on Whitefish Lake — one at City Beach and a city-run station at Whitefish Lake State Park. The inspec-

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tion station at City Beach will be open from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. in May and August, from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. in June and July and from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. in September. At State Park, the inspection station will be open from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.

High risk watercraft will also be required to undergo a decontamination process and inspection before entering the lake. Those watercraft include those with ballast tanks or bags, those that have been in mussel-infested waters in the past 30 days, those with standing water or those inspectors deem too dirty to inspect.

Boats requiring decontamination will be directed to a decontamination station at Whitefish Marine and Powersports on U.S. Highway 93 South. The station will be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. May 1 to June 15 and Aug. 16 to Sept. 30, from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. June 16 to Aug. 15.

There is no charge for inspection, but the decontamination fee is \$40.

There will be a learning curve the first year for boat owners, says Curtis, but the program has been designed to be as convenient as possible.

"People who come to Whitefish with watercraft is a good thing," she said. "We want to protect Montana against AIS, but we also don't want to change the experience of the lake."

To help streamline the process, users can have their boat sealed upon exiting the lake to avoid re-inspection upon returning to Whitefish Lake.

There will also be reciprocity with state stations and boats sealed at those stations will be allowed to launch after an abbreviated inspection.

Nonmotorized watercraft like canoes, kayaks, and stand-up paddleboards will be able to launch after obtaining a sticker certifying that the owner has passed an online self-certification program.

Boats wanting to launch in the lake in the off season, Oct. 1 to April 30, will also have to pass the certification program, which will give them the

lock code to enter and exit the boats ramps at City Beach and Whitefish Lake State Park, which will be gated during the off season and when inspection stations are closed.

The Whitefish Lake Institute is heading up an education and outreach program designed to notify potential users of the lake and retailers about the changes. An information sheet on the AIS inspections is being included in the utility billing for the city of Whitefish. Marine sales businesses in the Flathead Valley have been contacted and brochures are being distributed to area retailers that rent boats and hand-powered watercraft.

Mike Koopal, WLI executive director, said the goal is to prepare boats for what to expect when they get to the boat launch and hopefully those boats that require decontamination complete that before arriving at the launch.

"We want to make sure this doesn't decrease the recreational experience," Koopal said. "Our role is to get the word out to people."

Aquatic invasive species are non-native plants and animals that impact water bodies and wetlands. An infestation of zebra or quagga mussels have become of increasing concern and could have devastating effects for Whitefish Lake and the Columbia River Basin.

Koopal says Whitefish Lake has the right water temperature and calcium levels for mussels to inhabit the lake. A mussel colonization could have long-reaching economic and environmental consequences for Whitefish and the lake, he notes.

Mussels could impact the ecology of the lake by adding nutrients to the lake and effecting the food chain. Decreased recreation is likely because mussels have sharp shells that can cause cuts to hands and feet of swimmers. Economically, decreased recreation could impact businesses on the lake along with the hotels and restaurants who serve visitors, and as the water quality of the lake decreases property values would likely decrease.

"We are the stewards

of that resource and we hate for AIS to come in under our watch," he said. "This program is encouraging that there is local buy-in. We feel like this a community program and it couldn't have happened without the partners involved."

For more information, visit www.whitefishlake.org.