



City Beach: Matt Baldwin / Whitefish

Upping the fight against aquatic invasives

Wednesday, May 29, 2013 12:30 am

By HEIDI DESCH Whitefish Pilot

Along with the unofficial start to the summer season last week, so began increased efforts to keep aquatic invasive species out of Whitefish Lake and other area water bodies.

The City of Whitefish is investing in these ongoing efforts after city council's approval earlier this month of spending \$40,000 toward several programs that deal with management and prevention efforts for AIS.

"The measures taken by city council on the AIS issue clearly demonstrate vision to protect our way of life and economy," said Mike Koopal with the Whitefish Lake Institute. "The strength and durability of the Whitefish economy is closely linked to the health of the local environment. Few places in the U.S. can offer high water quality, surrounding forested lands, abundance of wildlife and proximity to recreational activities."

Half of the money is being spent to contribute to a partnership to open a new watercraft inspection station on U.S. Highway 2. The balance of the money will be distributed to four areas for education, early detection and monitoring of AIS on Flathead Basin lakes.

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. The 2013 Legislature recently strengthened the state's AIS laws.

The lake institute asked the city to support the AIS management plan, which it says will address the AIS threat on multiple fronts and leverage funding from other partners.

"It's very clear in case studies where aquatic invasive species have colonized waterways that money spent on prevention is a drop in the bucket compared to on-going management costs should AIS become established," Koopal said. "The AIS issue must be tackled on a regional basis to ensure protection of any specific waterbody."

Last year, boats set to launch into Whitefish Lake were found to have zebra mussel fragments and in 2011 Eurasian watermilfoil was discovered in Beaver Lake.

Mayor John Muhlfeld pointed to these two incidents as a lesson for the city that AIS early detection and control requires a concerted effort on behalf of all municipalities and private citizens, not just Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

"The financial commitment made by the City of Whitefish this year, which I strongly encouraged the council to approve, shows our strong commitment to preventing AIS invasions both locally and regionally," he said. "By taking this proactive step, we are hoping to encourage Flathead County and other municipalities to do their fair share and contribute to this much-needed, multi-agency and multi-jurisdictional partnership."

The city is partnering with the Flathead Basin Commission and Bureau of Reclamation to open the new inspection station located between Coram and West Glacier. The station is designed to help protect waterbodies from potential

infestation from the north and east where no safeguards currently exist. The station is set to be open 10 to 12 hours per day.

The Flathead Chapter of Trout Unlimited has expressed interest in helping to fund the Canyon station. Support from Trout Unlimited and other groups could be key to keeping the station operating through Labor Day, according to Flathead Basin Commission executive director Caryn Miske.

In addition to the funding, the city also gave its support to use a lake institute intern and extend hours of staffing at the City Beach boat launch. The intern will work during peak use periods and help with education and perform cursory inspections of boats. WLI already trains city staff annually on AIS. Inspections began last week and the goal will be to run inspections for 10 hours per day through Labor Day.

Koopal said state inspection sites are focused on the borders. Adding these two inspection sites, he said, helps to add another level of protection to the Flathead Basin.

"We can't just rely on border inspection stations alone," Koopal said. "The main focus is that we get the interstate transfer of boats that may not have been inspected at the border. The site on Highway 2 would protect the basin from the north and east because there is not an inspection state on the east side of Glacier Park. There are ways a contaminated boat can get here without being inspected."

Four programs will receive \$5,000 each from the city, including to the FBC to support an AIS technical consultant for AIS education, for control of Eurasian watermilfoil in Beaver Lake, AIS plant monitoring in nearby lakes and DNA analysis to detect for zebra mussels in area lakes.

The city is adding to support already in place by various entities in Flathead and Lake counties for the FBC technical consultant. The consultant disseminates information on AIS issues, including control and eradication techniques, inspection training and responding when infected vessels are found.

The city's management plan supports the continued eradication and control effort of Eurasian watermilfoil in Beaver Lake with funds given to FBC. Koopal said he is encouraged by initial eradication techniques, but work is needed for at least the next five years to monitor and eradicate any additional plants.

The Northwest Montana Lakes Volunteer Monitoring Network will receive funds to continue early detection monitoring of nearby lakes. The network is a partnership between WLI, FBC and FWP. The network recruits and trains volunteers to monitor for a number of AIS in 40 local lakes at more than 50 sites.

Also part of the monitoring network, money will be set aside for environmental DNA analysis. The network currently tests for zebra mussel larvae at area lakes, but this would add DNA analysis as a way to increase possible detection.

"If an invasion occurs in Whitefish Lake, people who may view AIS on the periphery as a public issue will realize that their private lives may be affected," Koopal said. "Recreational opportunities could diminish, property values may go down and tourism dollars may be reduced."