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Outdoors

Whitefish Fortifies Defense Against Invasive Species

As state expands efforts to curb threat of invasive species, local leaders take initiative to protect Whitefish Lake

Boats prepare to launch from the dock at City Beach on Whitefish Lake.
BEACON FILE PHOTO

BY TRISTAN SCOTT OF THE BEACON

MONTANA'S EXPANDED watercraft-inspection program to curb the threat of aquatic invasive species officially went online April 15, while local efforts to prevent the spread of the non-native offenders are going to be more visible than ever in the coming weeks and months as Whitefish debuts its new mandatory inspection stations.

Both locally and statewide, efforts to reduce the risk of aquatic invasive species spreading through Montana's water bodies have been stepped up in response to the positive detection last fall of invasive mussel larvae east of the Continental Divide in Tiber Reservoir, as well as their suspected presence in Canyon Ferry Reservoir and the Missouri River near Townsend.

The detections led Gov. Steve Bullock to declare a natural resource emergency and form a joint mussel response team in November. The mussel response team developed a course of action for expanded inspection stations, decontamination stations at Tiber and Canyon Ferry Reservoirs and a more intensive monitoring and public education program.

So far, the traces of contamination are restricted to the Missouri River Basin, but the likelihood persists of mussels hitchhiking on the hulls of boats or in bilge water or cloistered away in irrigation equipment. The threat of mussel infestation hits especially close to home for those working to protect the waters of Flathead Lake and its surrounding network of rivers and creeks, and it comes to

rest at the doorstep of the Columbia River Basin — the only major watershed in the West still believed to be free of quagga and zebra mussels.

The urgency of the threat is what prompted the city of Whitefish to partner with the Whitefish Lake Institute and Montana State Parks to craft a plan aimed at building a perimeter of mandatory inspection stations around Whitefish Lake, which, compared to other lakes radiating with access points, is relatively easy to contain.

"We are lucky because we have two main launch sites and 10 small launch sites that are all cooperating," Lori Curtis, of the Whitefish Lake Institute, said. "This local program is going to be the biggest in the state of Montana. There is no 100 percent, perfect prevention against aquatic invasive species. But this is going to be the best protection short of closing the lake."

Still, the presence of expanded inspection stations will be a new experience for recreational boaters on Whitefish Lake. Beginning May 1 and running through the end of September, a mandatory watercraft inspection station will offer extended hours at Whitefish City Beach while a separate city-run watercraft inspection station will operate at Whitefish Lake State Park. Meanwhile, a decontamination station will operate at Whitefish Marine and Powersports on U.S. Highway 93, while the boat ramps will also be controlled after hours.

The inspection station at Whitefish City Beach will operate from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. in May, August and September, and from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. in June and July. At Whitefish Lake State Park, the inspection

station will operate from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Anyone carrying or towing any motorized or non-motorized watercraft must stop at all watercraft inspection stations, and all watercraft must be inspected prior to launching in Whitefish Lake.

Decontamination is necessary whenever a boat is launching in Whitefish Lake with ballast tanks or bags; has been in a mussel-infested waterway in the past 30 days; has standing water; or inspectors deem it too dirty to inspect.

"Because this is our first year requiring this, we are asking for the public's patience," Curtis said. "We are trying to communicate to as many members of the public as possible so they don't have their recreational pursuits destroyed by this program. But we can't stress the program's importance enough. In Whitefish, we are at the headwaters of Flathead Lake so anything that we do here is going to affect the entire Flathead system."

Because the boat accesses are small both at Whitefish City Beach and Whitefish Lake State Park, Curtis said she has concerns about crowded lines. To alleviate congestion, she said a sticker program will help streamline low-risk, non-motorized, hand-launched watercraft like canoes, kayaks and stand-up paddleboards.

The Whitefish City Council last month approved spending nearly \$140,000 on the plan, noting the havoc an infestation could wreak on the region ecologically and economically.

An infestation of zebra or quagga mussels could spell the beginning of the end for Montana's most pristine watersheds, holding the potential to topple

underwater food webs that prop up the Treasure State's prized aquatic species while wreaking untold havoc on its infrastructure and recreation economy.

Caryn Miske, executive director of the Flathead Basin Commission, which has called for more autonomy to enforce watercraft inspections in the Flathead, said locally led programs like the one in Whitefish should be commended.

"I think those local efforts are where it's at," Miske said. "The city is showing incredible leadership. Wherever we can give water bodies that extra boost and that extra attention, we should do it."

Mike Cuffe, a Republican lawmaker from Eureka who has advocated for expanded resources to combat aquatic invasive species, said the state's new approach is a great improvement on its earlier efforts.

Cuffe, who was instrumental this legislative session in introducing successful measures to fund a broader aquatic invasive species program, said he's optimistic to see Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation taking the issue so seriously.

The Republican lawmaker emerged as a critic of the state's response after the positive detections of mussels last fall, particularly after he learned that some of the inspection stations had been taken offline, including one in Eureka.

"I was more than chagrined, especially since one of the stations was in my hometown," he said. "I felt almost betrayed. But we have stepped things up considerably."

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