

Check station inspects 2,000 boats; Whitefish Lake free of exotic plants

City AIS partner program completes first year

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This summer's efforts to prevent aquatic invasive species in area water bodies resulted in more than 2,000 boat inspections at a new check station at Coram and expanded monitoring of several area lakes.

A partnership between several agencies created the inspection station on U.S. Highway 2 near Coram. While monitoring and eradication of Eurasian watermilfoil at Beaver Lake continued, an additional aquatic plant survey was conducted in Whitefish Lake and DNA samples from other local lakes are being screened for zebra and quagga mussels.

The Flathead Basin Commission and Whitefish Lake Institute recently released a summary of these activities.

The City of Whitefish invested \$40,000 toward several AIS programs based upon a Whitefish Lake Institute management plan. The city contracted with the Flathead Basin Commission as well as WLI to implement these programs.

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. 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 the eradication efforts in Beaver Lake and AIS monitoring along the Whitefish Lake shoreline as successful.

"The 2013 AIS efforts were the first steps in the right direction, but as with any fledgling program, we will continue to refine the program in 2014 to most effectively leverage limited funds," he said.

Muhlfeld said he would encourage the city council to consider funding the AIS program again next year.

"The city has evaluated a few different options including staffing our own check station at City Beach, but has determined the most effective use of limited funds is to collaborate with other entities," he said.

The check station in Coram inspected 2,096 boats. Native vegetation was found on six boats, but no invasive species were found.

The station was a collaboration between the City of Whitefish, the Flathead Basin Commission, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Trout Unlimited and the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. The Flathead Basin Commission, as well as a part-time staff member from Glacier National Park, provided oversight.

From May to September the station was opened from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Boats from Montana, Idaho, Washington,

Oregon, Wyoming, Alberta and British Columbia were considered low risk and received normal inspections. All other states considered high risk underwent more thorough inspections.

Of the boats checked, 77 percent were from Montana, 16 percent were from other low-risk states and 7 percent were from high-risk states. The station experienced drive-bys with most being non-motorized watercraft, however, 811 motorized craft drove by the check station without being inspected.

For the six boats found to have vegetation, all vegetation was removed and the boaters were informed of the dangers posed by transport of aquatic vegetation.

Muhlfeld said he would like to see the program run longer. As an example, he said, Idaho began inspections in February and by mid-May had intercepted about 30 mussel-fouled boats.

"It was a success, but we still have many challenges with regards to funding and the hours of operation and the duration of the inspection season," he said. "While our schedule this year was a good first step, we are potentially missing a large segment of the high risk boats by starting our inspections so late in the season. This is a funding issue we are hoping to address next year by encouraging other municipalities and stakeholders to support ongoing AIS efforts in the Flathead Basin."

No exotic species were found after the lake institute conducted a 395-point aquatic plant survey along the Whitefish Lake shoreline. The survey consisted of determining the type of plants and the abundance of species at each location.

In 2011 Eurasian watermilfoil was discovered at Beaver Lake. A control and eradication effort at the lake began last year with a dredge operation removing the weed and barriers were installed. Removal efforts continued this year with a diver pulling seven pounds of the weed from the lake and a turbidity curtain was placed in the lake to prevent fragments from exiting the lake via Beaver Creek. In addition, fragrant water lily was removed from the dock area.

The Northwest Montana Lakes Volunteer Monitoring Network, a partnership between the lake institute, basin commission and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, conducted environmental DNA testing on 25 local lakes including Whitefish Lake and Blanchard Lake.

The samples were screened for Eurasian watermilfoil and zebra and quagga mussels. The University of Montana is testing the samples. In addition, separate samples were sent to FWP to test for zebra mussel larvae. No positive findings were found.