

OPINION

Seaplane pilots tell how they can fight invasive species

By LARRY ASHCRAFT

Montana seaplane pilots stand ready to assist in the fight against aquatic invasive species.

As residents of the Flathead Basin, we share the Flathead Basin Commission's concern regarding the potential dangers posed by the introduction of aquatic invasive species in Flathead Basin waters. Montana seaplane pilots choose to live and work in this area due to our appreciation of the beautiful lakes and the remarkable business and recreational opportunities they provide. We support the Basin Commission and other regulatory agencies' efforts to mitigate this danger and want to be a partner in that effort.

To that end, Montana seaplane pilots, with our international and regional counterparts, have provided accurate and detailed information about the minimal risks posed by seaplanes in the spread of AIS and several potential plans to address that minimal risk.

Most folks we have talked to about this issue haven't had much experience with seaplanes. That is understandable as there are fewer than 100 in Montana. It is estimated that there are fewer than 300 total seaplane operators when Idaho, Wyoming, North Dakota and South Dakota are included. These numbers, as compared to approximately 68,000 registered motor boats and an estimated 78,000 paddle craft in Montana alone, demonstrate the relatively minimal risk posed by seaplanes.

Ashcraft, of Polson, is a seaplane pilot and past president of the Flathead Lakers. He was joined in signing this letter by Peter Gross of Kalispell, owner of Backcountry Flying Experience; Paul Olechowski of Bigfork, an airline and seaplane pilot; Perry Brown of Columbia Falls, president of the Montana Seaplane Pilot Association; and John Wachmuth of Kalispell, retired AIS specialist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Stefanie Thompson

News editor

In addition to the small number of seaplane operators in our area, the actual construction and operation of seaplanes further lowers the risk of spreading AIS. Contrary to what has been reported (in other media), seaplane floats do not leak water when they are on a body of water due to positive hydraulic pressure. Water may in fact, be forced into a float but the hydraulic pressure will not allow it to leak out. The water must be pumped out and the amounts are small enough that they can be put in containers. In addition, AIS are highly susceptible to dehydration, thus flying greater distances and for longer periods of time between bodies of water will eliminate the threat of AIS to exposed surfaces of floats and hulls.

In addition, the issue of AIS is not new to the seaplane pilot community. The Montana Seaplane Pilot Association has been tackling this issue for over four years. Nationally the seaplane community has been working on this issue for over a decade. As a result, both the international Seaplane Pilot Association and the Washington regional association of seaplane pilots have developed training videos and certification programs for both inspection of AIS and decontamination procedures. Procedures which are currently being successfully utilized in several states and local jurisdictions who have tackled the issue of AIS, including the state of Washington. In addition to requiring the use of this scientifically accepted protocol, Montana seaplane pilots propose:

- Adding the AIS status of all Montana waterways to the SPA mobile app at our expense; including instructions and procedures for utilizing Montana's waterways.
- Requiring pilots to carry a waterway visitation log book which indicates where the plane has operated in the past 30 days.
- Sending written correspondence to every seaplane pilot in the country advising them of the AIS status of all Montana waterways and instructions and procedures for utilizing Montana waterways.
- Requiring every pilot entering Montana waterways to make contact with a SPA volunteer prior to landing.
- Providing area regulators the names and contact information of SPA volunteers for assistance in verification of pilot compliance with seaplane protocols.

The seaplane pilot community is an extensively trained and highly regulated group. They are accustomed to following highly technical rules, regulations, and protocols. As a matter of fact, their very lives and the lives of their passengers depend on it. Montana seaplane pilots are sincere in our efforts to be a partner in the effort to combat AIS, and are willing to go above and beyond scientifically established protocols. We are also willing to fund the majority of the cost of our own regulatory protocol. Montana seaplane pilots look forward to working with the Flathead Basin Commission and other regulatory entities to ensure that AIS does not impact the Flathead Basin.