

Whitefish Pilot

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Invasive species growing concern for Whitefish Lake

Prevention efforts could ramp up this year

By DANIEL MCKAY
Whitefish Pilot

Efforts to keep Whitefish Lake free of aquatic invasive species could be ramped up this year after zebra mussel larvae in two Montana water bodies this fall caused boating closures in other parts of the state.

Aquatic invasive species, including non-native plant, fish, mussels and clams, are an increasing concern for their negative impacts on rivers and lakes, according to the Whitefish Lake Institute.

Mike Koopal, executive director of the institute, said Whitefish Lake is at risk because it has similar conditions to the kinds of places zebra mussels like to call home.

"It's a huge threat. It's a game-changer, both for our lake ecology and our local economy," he said. "We have the right calcium levels, relatively the right water temperatures."

The Montana Mussel Response Team in recent testing confirmed cases of mus-

sel larvae limited to several positive test results in Tiber Reservoir, east of Shelby. After initial tests revealed suspected mussel larvae in Canyon Ferry Reservoir near Helena and the Missouri and Milk rivers, further sampling resulted in no new positive hits.

The city of Whitefish for the past several years has been working to prevent AIS from entering Whitefish Lake. Last year the city invested \$30,000 in several programs aimed at management and prevention efforts for AIS.

In 2016, there were 2,280 boats that passed through

the inspection station at City Beach from May 28 to Sept. 1, the busiest days being over Fourth of July weekend.

Last summer the city staffed the inspection station at City Beach from Memorial Day to Labor Day, covering the peak usage months for the lake, but that timeframe might not be enough, Whitefish Mayor John Muhlfeld said. Likewise, inspectors don't have the enforcement authority to turn away boats that may carry AIS.

"Right now the city parks department that manages the AIS program, they don't have the legal authority to actually

prevent launching, and that's something we are going to address for the upcoming boat season," Muhlfeld said.

Early detection efforts include monitoring from environmental DNA analysis to detect for AIS in the lake.

Koopal said every cent the city spends on keeping AIS away from Whitefish Lake is worth it.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so every year that we keep them out of Whitefish Lake, we're ahead a lot financially," he

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said. "That cost of prevention is nothing compared to if we have them."

If Whitefish Lake were to become contaminated, Koopal said the costs of cleanup would include routine maintenance for affected areas and continued cleaning of the city's water infrastructure. A decontamination station for watercraft could also cost around \$60,000, he said, though there isn't room for one at City Beach.

Muhlfeld said the city currently derives about 10 percent of its municipal water supply from the lake. Factoring in cleanup costs, Muhlfeld said the city would take a big hit financially from an AIS infestation.

"It could be economically devastating," he said.

Whitefish's tourism industry would likely take a hit as well.

Dylan Boyle, executive director of the Whitefish Visitors and Convention Bureau, said that while most summer visitors come to Whitefish for its proximity to Glacier National Park, recreation on Whitefish Lake plays a big role in summer tourism.

"When you're talking any sort of changes in travel and tourism visitation, there's usually environmental or economic factors at play, and so a severe economic factor such as aquatic invasive species at the lake could be seriously detrimental," Boyle said.

Once contaminated, no one has found a way to get rid of zebra mussels, Koopal said.

"As a general rule of thumb, once you get an aquatic invasive, you're living with it," he said.

Koopal said WLI, along with the Joe and Cindy Gregory Family, is working on the construction of a new watercraft inspection station for City Beach. The building will

Efforts to contain AIS in Beaver Lake find success

By DANIEL MCKAY
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Efforts to contain and eradicate an aquatic invasive species from Beaver Lake so far have proven successful.

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation in October 2011 discovered Eurasian watermilfoil near the boat ramp at Beaver Lake west of Whitefish. Eurasian watermilfoil is an aquatic plant that grows in still or slow-moving water. If left untreated, it can form dense vegetation mats on the water, which can threaten the health of the affected water body and interfere with recreational activities like fishing, swimming and boating. Property values for lakefront homes can also be negatively impacted by an infestation.

formalize the inspection program, provide space to store equipment and will offer shelter for inspectors during bad weather. That station is expected

to be

operational this year. After the discovery of the milfoil, an AIS response group, which includes Whitefish Lake Institute, placed bottom barriers over the identified patch of milfoil and developed a control and eradication plan with the city of Whitefish, WLI director Mike Koopal said.

In 2012, 23.5 pounds of the plant was removed from Beaver Lake through a suction dredging operation, and by 2016 milfoil had only a very small presence in the lake. Last year less than a quarter of a pound of milfoil was removed from five plants in the lake.

"We're down to just one or two individual plants per year that we're sucking out of there, so that's a success," Koopal said.

Koopal said this success story

is atypical of AIS infestations, where such thorough treatment is rarely the reality.

Very early detection and aggressive eradication techniques helped make Beaver Lake the exception, Koopal said, and suction dredging will continue until the institute is sure milfoil is eradicated.

Full eradication is especially important because of Beaver Lake's proximity to Whitefish Lake, Koopal said.

"Beaver Lake is hydrologically connected to Whitefish Lake and it's only a quarter mile flight for a duck with some watermilfoil wrapped around its leg to land in Whitefish Lake," Koopal said. "Then we have a big problem."

lake.

Koopal said WLI is applying for a Department of Natural Resources grant to fund a station in 2017 and will

be meeting with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Park representatives in early January to discuss the logistics of a station.

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