



MIKE KOOPAL, executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute, fills a mobile decontamination station's gas tank in preparation for winter. (Patrick Reilly/Daily Inter Lake)

State on the lookout for a miniature but devastating foe

By PATRICK REILLY
Daily Inter Lake

Last boating season, the quagga mussels that have crashed fisheries and clogged pipes across America were known to exist in Montana.

To keep them out of the Flathead Basin, the Whitefish Lake Institute rolled out a bright yellow trailer.

The \$23,000 mobile decontamination station, purchased by the Whitefish Community Foundation and parked at Whitefish Marina

and Power Sports on U.S. 93, gave staff easy access to hoses, a power washer, and other equipment to kill quagga and zebra mussels. After a successful first season, it was towed to the home of the institute's executive director, Mike Koopal, for winterization.

"This was only used for high-risk watercraft," Koopal told the Daily Inter Lake. "When a boat went through the two inspection stations, and inspectors, through our algorithm, determined that it was high risk, it got sent out to get

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The Daily Inter Lake outlines the threat of quagga and zebra mussels in Montana, and shows the state's response from the first discovery in October 2016 until today.

decontaminated." "Any ballast boat that hasn't been out of water for 30 days, or any boat that has come to Whitefish from a mussel-fouled state or waterbody" — about 125 in all this year — got sent to

the station.

When Koopal founded the Whitefish Lake Institute in 2005, he says it focused on water quality. It's since broadened its mission to fight the invasive plants and animals edging in on its namesake water body.

That task gained new urgency on Nov. 9, 2016, when Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks announced that quagga mussel larvae had been found in the Tiber Reservoir and were suspected in Canyon Ferry

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MUSSELS

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Reservoir — a short ride in a towed boat's hull or ballast tank from the Columbia River Basin's unfested waters.

"My immediate reaction was, 'I'm really interested to see what the state does,'" Koopal remembers. "The second reaction was, 'we need to significantly beef up our local efforts.'"

Environmental groups across Montana, and every level of government, have done just that. In an expensive project with no guarantee of success, they're deploying inspection stations, billboards and informational campaigns, all to stop a thumbnail-sized organism with microscopic larvae.

Three weeks after the discovery's announcement, Gov. Steve Bullock declared a natural resource emergency and created an incident management organization.

The newly formed Mussel Response Team spent the winter tightening regulations. New Fish, Wildlife and Parks administrative rules banned transporting surface water, and required inspections for all boats entering Montana and crossing the Continental Divide.

The Legislature also took action. On May 18, 2017, with boating season getting underway, Bullock signed Senate Bill 363 into law. The measure, passed with bipartisan support, required Montana fishers to buy a \$2 permit, and out-of-staters to buy a \$15 permit. Hydroelectric energy producers would pay \$796 per megawatt. These fees were expected to raise nearly \$7 million per year, to support education, inspection and decontamination.

A separate measure, House Bill 622, added further safeguards in Northwest Montana. Among other measures, it gave the Flathead Basin Commission authority to raise funds for inspections and decontaminations. Greg Lemon, information bureau chief for Fish, Wildlife

and Parks — says the state went from running 19 boat stations in 2016 to 35 this year.

Municipalities and environmental groups are also operating stations, one of which recently sat in Mike Koopal's driveway getting readied for winter.

FOR KOOPAL, running it fits a long career protecting sensitive environments.

"I started with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks doing field biology," he said. That "gave me a lot of field experience, and that's translated over into my job now."

Speaking with the Daily Inter Lake in the institute's storefront office, he put the focus on numbers and results.

"Between the two inspection stations on the lake, we had 6,423 visits" this year. Of that, we had 3,368 full inspections, and we had 3,054 exit seals removed."

The "exit seals," attached to a boat's hitch when it leaves the lake, are designed to break when it slides into water; if a boater shows up with one still attached, it hasn't been used since its last lake visit, and doesn't need to be re-inspected.

"It really created efficiencies with the inspection process

To that end, he said, "It sounds like Montana is doing the right thing."

But the state's budget crisis could make it tough to continue. The Flathead Basin Commission, coordinating the response in Northwest Montana, may soon be unable to pay its executive director, Caryn Miske, if cuts requested to balance the state budget take place. Meanwhile, House Bill 622 allowed the Basin Commission to raise funds by selling boat stickers, but Fish, Wildlife and Parks now argues that it doesn't have that authority, putting \$1 million to \$1.5 million in expected revenue from the program at risk.

However these fights turn out, Koopal knows he'll have to work with finite resources. Staffing for the Whitefish decontamination station alone cost \$25,000 this year.

"You get into this question of 'What is enough?' and it's usually driven by a budget," he says. "We understand that we can't inspect every boat that is a hand-launched, non-motorized boat, and [so] they're a lower risk."

This tactic staved off an infestation this year, and mussel-watchers now have a few months' reprieve. As Koopal spoke with the Daily Inter Lake, a rain-snow mix pelted the institute's windows. Mussels generally don't reproduce when the water temperature dips below 50 degrees.

"You're looking at an organism that has a complicated life history," he reflects, "and that's actually a pretty impressive biology." Zebra and quagga mussels glue to the surface of speeding vehicles, breed by the trillions when not preyed upon, and, Koopal said with a rueful shake of his head, defy eradication.

"The paradigm has been changed forever with the boating public," he said. "It's just an issue that this generation of recreationalists will have to deal with and plan for."



THE WHITEFISH Lake Institute's mobile decontamination station at City Beach in Whitefish. (Patrick Reilly/Daily Inter Lake)

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