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Whitefish Pilot

Boat inspections at Whitefish Lake down slightly last year



A boat heads out into Whitefish Lake from the City Beach dock. (Heidi Desch/Whitefish Pilot)

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The total number of watercraft inspected prior to entering Whitefish Lake last year decreased slightly from the year before.

A total of about 5,370 watercraft passed through the aquatic invasive species check station compared to the previous year when about 5,575 watercraft were inspected, according to the annual spring update on the program by the Whitefish Lake Institute presented to Whitefish City Council.

“It’s not unusual that there was a decrease in boats since we didn’t have any Canadian visitors due to the COVID pandemic,” said Mike Koopal, executive director of WLI.

He also points out that the decrease isn’t significant meaning that more in-state and out-of-state boaters made up the difference from not having boats coming from Canada.

The City of Whitefish runs watercraft inspection stations both at City Beach and Whitefish Lake State Park boat ramps, in a program in partnership with the Whitefish Lake Institute and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

All watercraft are required to be inspected for aquatic invasive species prior to launching into Whitefish Lake. High risk watercraft must also undergo decontamination prior to launch.

Inspection stations are open from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day weekend from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

The total number of boats inspected in 2018 was roughly 6,000 boats and 2017 saw about 6,500 boats.

While the total number of watercraft inspected has decreased over several years, that can be attributed to an increased number of boats taking advantage of the exit seal program. This allows for boats when leaving Whitefish Lake to be attached with an exit seal then if they are not launched in another waterbody before returning to Whitefish Lake they don’t have to go through inspection again prior to launch.

“This really makes for a more efficient program and saves visitor and staff time,” Koopal said.

The number of exit seals attached to boats in 2020 was about 4,400.

In terms of preventative decontamination, about 7% of all boats inspected in 2020 were decontaminated. High-risk watercraft are required to be decontaminated including those with ballast tanks/bags, those that have been in a mussel infested state or waterbody in the last 30 days, those with standing water and a watercraft too dirty to inspect.

“Roughly less than 10 percent of boats entering Whitefish Lake have to be decontaminated,” Koopal said.

Mayor John Muhlfeld thanked the city’s Parks and Recreation Department and WLI for their work in running the boat inspection stations and managing the AIS program.

Also as part of the Whitefish Lake AIS management program update, Koopal provided an update on the control and eradication effort for Eurasian watermilfoil in Beaver Lake.

About three pounds of the plant were removed by hand last year by FWP divers. In 2019, FWP assumed management of the issue with the support of WLI staff. The year prior 12 plants were found after none were found the year before.

Efforts to control and eradicate the aquatic invasive species began in 2012 as a multi-agency cooperative effort after the watermilfoil was discovered the year before near the boat ramp. That year 235 pounds of the plant were removed from the lake.

The 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.

WLI continues to maintain a sediment curtain near the outlet of the lake to Beaver Creek to minimize the potential for downstream drift of plant fragments to the creek and Whitefish Lake.