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AQUATIC INVADERS Commission mulls options for 2021 legislation, prevention

By KIANNA GARDNER
Daily Inter Lake

While the number of watercraft inspections for aquatic invasive species has grown significantly over the past nine years, there are still plenty of holes in the state's monitoring system that need to be addressed moving into 2020.

That was one of the takeaways from the Upper Columbia Conservation Commission meeting in Evergreen this week to align the group's two-year vision for battling aquatic invasive species in Montana.

The commission, which goes by UC3, was created in the last legislative session to assist with AIS prevention and management in the Upper Columbia Basin. The Columbia River Basin is the largest watershed in the Lower 48 that doesn't have mussels, and UC3 and countless other stakeholders hope to keep it that way.

The topic of invasive species has dominated concerns at local and state levels in recent years as Montana faces an increasing number of run-ins with boats and other watercraft contaminated with species such as quagga mussels. According to Tom Woolf, chief of the Aquatic Invasive Species Bureau of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, as of late, much of the boat traffic has come from the Dakotas and from Lake Powell, the large man-made lake straddling the Utah-Arizona border that became infested with quagga mussels in 2013.

The troubling situation has prompted agencies to bolster inspection checkpoints, training, outreach and education efforts and more.

"Our focus is on the out-of-state boats coming in," Woolf told UC3 members and other stakeholders. "We're going to inspect as many boats as we have the resources to, but it's not just about the quantity of boats we inspect."

Having to do more with a limited pool of funds is a familiar story for conservation agencies, but other challenges include how to catch boats that travel across state lines at night after inspection hours, ways to better involve law enforcement, how to implement better training and how to expand sampling efforts in major water bodies such as Flathead Lake.

The lake is a target destination for many out-of-state boaters and members of the commission said existing sampling efforts are not aggressive enough. Early detection and monitoring capabilities allow researchers to detect new invasions before they can become established and increase the feasibility of eradication. The commission briefly discussed proposed AIS samplings for 2020 — a list that shows Flathead Lake

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is expected to be sampled the most by various conservation groups and agencies at 216 samples. This is the highest number in the state by a wide margin, with the second-highest being Swan Lake, followed by Seeley and Salmon Lakes.

But above all, Woolf and others were adamant about bulking up the education side of prevention, saying boaters themselves need to understand the importance of getting their watercraft inspected.

"Every time you pull your boat out of the water, it should be clean and dry. Aside from that, it's the boater's responsibility to get their boats checked," Woolf said.

THE SECOND portion of Wednesday's meeting was the upcoming 2021 Montana legislative session and how the commission can be proactive in addressing challenges and gaps related to AIS. The discussion ended with

UC3 voting to form an ad-hoc legislative committee that will be expected to help spearhead legislative issues from February 2020 to May 2021 when the session wraps up.

Creating a formal aquatic invasive species list, requiring boaters to pull their boat's drain plug and establishing higher fees for boaters that fail to stop at inspection station were a few of the suggestions that went before the commission for consideration.

The latter two would address gaps related to AIS enforcement and penalties, which Bryce Christiaens of Missoula County Weed District and Extension and others said are fairly lax in Montana.

For example, Montana is one of a few western states that does not have a drain-plug rule, despite the "Pull the Plug" regulation proving successful elsewhere. Christiaens said the commission should consider supporting a legislative fix that would require compartments with standing water to be open and drained during transpor-

tation.

Montana also fines only \$85 to boaters who drive by check stations — a figure many believe needs to be raised.

"There have been a number of efforts to raise that minimum to increase deterrence," Christiaens said. "One of the legislative fixes we could pursue is to insert a larger minimum into the statute."

While \$85 is listed as a minimum fine, the law also states the maximum is \$500. Stakeholders said both figures seem to pale in comparison to those enforced for other outdoor activities in Montana, including

various fees associated with hunting violations amounting to \$1,000 or more.

The commission and newly formed ad hoc committee will go back-and-forth in the coming months, determining which issues should be prioritized.

To read more about aquatic invasive species in Montana, prevention methods and regulations go to fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/species/ais/

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