

Nonprofit honors FWP for efforts around AIS



Mike Koopal, executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute, left, presents the WLI Stewardship Award to the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks dive team for their efforts to contain Eurasian watermilfoil at Beaver Lake. (Courtesy photo)

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Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks staff recently received special recognition for their work monitoring, preventing, and suppressing aquatic invasive species.

Mike Koopal, founder and executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute, recently presented the WLI Stewardship Award to the dive team and others to express gratitude for their work and collaboration in this area.

In recent years, a team of FWP specialists in northwest Montana has partnered with the Whitefish Lake Institute and the City of Whitefish in an effort to prevent the spread of AIS in the Flathead Valley. The effort is part of FWP's broader statewide AIS prevention program.

The local partnership has involved monitoring Whitefish Lake and surrounding bodies of water and maintaining a local decontamination station for boats.

This collaboration has also involved a unique project in Beaver Lake west of Whitefish. Beaver Lake is the only lake in the Flathead Basin that contains the highly invasive plant Eurasian watermilfoil and FWP staff are working to suppress it using underwater diving equipment.

Deceptively delicate and fragile in appearance, Eurasian watermilfoil forms thick mats in shallow areas of a lake, quickly growing and spreading to block sunlight, killing off native aquatic plants that fish and other underwater species rely on for food and shelter. If left unchecked, invasive watermilfoil will spread throughout a lake or even to other lakes by transmission.

FWP team members have installed bottom barriers and removed the plant by hand in an effort to suppress its growth in Beaver Lake. Starting in 2019, the group created a dive team that involved scuba diving underwater to seek out and remove the invasive plant by hand. This has proven to be an effective way to make progress in the suppression efforts. It has also allowed team members to place underwater barriers that help reduce spread. The efforts continue with the goal of eradicating Eurasian watermilfoil from the lake in its entirety.

The award was presented to Craig McLane, Stacy Schmidt, Jayden Duckworth, Ken Staigmiller, Russ Hartzell, Larry Lytle, Zach Crete and Thomas Woolf.

To learn more about Montana's AIS prevention program, visit CleanDrainDryMT.com

To learn more about the Whitefish Lake Institute, visit <https://whitefishlake.org/>