



Whitefish Lake Water Quality Summary

As field work begins for the 2026 sampling season on Whitefish Lake, it is a good time to review the 2025 data and compare it to long-term monitoring trends. In 2025, sampling was conducted from April through October at two established locations: a deep site off Hellroaring Point and a shallower site offshore from City Beach.

Overall, 2025 was a particularly clear year for Whitefish Lake. The average Secchi depth (a measure of water clarity) was 29 feet. This means that the Secchi disk, a black-and-white disk less than one foot in diameter, could be lowered an average of 29 feet before it disappeared from sight.

Chlorophyll-a, a pigment found in algae and used as a proxy for algal productivity, was slightly higher than in recent years. Continued monitoring of chlorophyll-a is important, as sustained increases may indicate elevated algae growth.

The deepest layer of Whitefish Lake continues to remain cold. However, surface water temperatures in 2025 were above average and have remained elevated over the past three years. Surface temperatures are closely correlated with air temperatures, and Montana has experienced several consecutive years of above-average summer heat. Increasing lake temperatures can contribute to habitat loss for cold-water fish species if deeper waters warm over time. Rising water temperatures may also contribute to increased algae and aquatic plant growth.

Because algal growth is also influenced by nutrient availability, limiting excess nutrient inputs to the lake remains important. This includes avoiding fertilizer use in shoreline areas or locations with stormwater runoff and ensuring that septic systems are properly maintained and regularly serviced.

Overall, Whitefish Lake remains in good condition. However, rising temperatures, nutrient inputs, and development pressures continue to be factors that warrant ongoing monitoring.

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WLI Limnologist Cassie Roberts and Program Coordinator Eric Parker collaborate with USFS Ksanka Ranger District staff on water sampling methodology during a gray April field day.

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Founded in 2005

Mission Statement

The Whitefish Lake Institute is committed to science, education, and aquatic resource initiatives to protect and improve Whitefish Lake and Whitefish area water resources today, while providing a collective community vision for tomorrow.

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Whitefish Lake Institute

Golden Mussels Raise New Concerns for Montana's Waters

As the weather continues to warm and boating season ramps up, the risk of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) spreads across northwest Montana. To meet this threat, inspection and decontamination stations across the state, like those in Whitefish, stand ready to guard our lakes and rivers.

Inspection stations have already intercepted 10 boats fouled with invasive quagga and zebra mussels in Montana this season. Recent events highlight the importance of interstate cooperation in preventing AIS spread. These nuisance invaders care little for the boundaries we draw between one state and another, and this year, AIS stations will expand monitoring for golden mussels.

Golden mussels originated from Asia and were first detected in the Port of Stockton in California's San Joaquin Delta in 2024. In less than two years, golden mussels have rapidly spread through water systems across the Delta and throughout California. The impact of golden mussels on water infrastructure like pipes, flood gates, and irrigation equipment has been so destructive that the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors unanimously declared a local state of emergency on April 29th.

Golden mussels were intercepted at an inspection point in Ashland, OR, on April 4th. These mussels pose a threat to ecosystems in a similar fashion to quagga and zebra mussels; however, golden mussel infestations are even more dangerous due to their ability to thrive and spread under harsher conditions (including brackish water) and their increased resistance to common treatment practices for other mussel species.

The rapid expansion of the golden mussel infestation across California has inspired significant concern among organizations involved with AIS prevention across the northwestern US. Golden mussels were officially added to the banned invasive species lists in Montana and Washington in late April, with similar efforts underway in neighboring states. The rapid and devastating spread of golden mussels in California serves as another reminder that following "Clean. Drain. Dry." and remaining vigilant are essential to protecting Montana waters from AIS.



This boat fouled with golden mussels was intercepted at the detection station in Ashland, OR on April 4th. Photo Credit: Beth Quillian, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

Emerging Contaminants PFAS: What to Know

The Interagency Fish Consumption Advisory Group (IFCAG) recently published the Montana Sport Fish Consumption Guidelines. IFCAG is comprised of representatives from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) and the Montana Department of Health and Human Services (MDPHHS). The guidelines, which include consumption advisories for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in fish, can be found on the FWP website.

PFAS are man-made chemicals used in a variety of industries and consumer products. These chemicals break down slowly and can accumulate over time. Exposure to PFAS may be harmful to human health, and scientific understanding of PFAS continues to grow.

DEQ and FWP partnered on a targeted study that began in 2023. The agencies sampled select waterbodies to determine whether PFAS are present in Montana waters and fish. At least one PFAS chemical

was detected in fish tissue at 12 of the 14 sampled locations and in surface water at 2 of the 14 locations. Flathead Lake was sampled, and no PFAS were found in fish tissue. Sample locations were chosen based on proximity to confirmed or potential PFAS sources and distributed across important regional fisheries.

Whitefish Lake was not part of the state study; however, in 2025, the Whitefish Lake Institute tested for PFAS in water samples from Whitefish Lake, the Whitefish River, and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Creeks in the Haskill Creek watershed. PFAS were detected at all sample locations. All samples were below EPA drinking water standards. In 2026, the City of Whitefish will begin quarterly sampling for PFAS at the entry point to its water distribution system.

Investing in Future Stewards

At the Whitefish Lake Institute, education and stewardship go hand in hand. This Spring, through scholarships and the Storm Drain Awareness Project, WLI continues to support students while helping protect local waterways.

WLI awarded four Ripple Effect Scholarships to students pursuing natural resource fields.



2026 Ripple Effect Scholarship Recipients from left to right: Grace Kepler, Alexandra Grube, Clare Helmstetler, and Ella Idleman



WLI's Storm Drain Awareness Project, in partnership with Whitefish High School art classes, continues to engage local students in watershed protection efforts. By painting the storm drains, students help raise awareness that stormwater flows untreated into nearby rivers and lakes.

We extend our appreciation to Whitefish High School's Introduction to Art, Advanced Art, and Sculpture classes for their dedicated work and to the City of Whitefish for continued collaboration.



Opening day at the Averill's Viking Creek Wetland Preserve brought a special guest waddling through the trailhead.



WLI partnered with Montana FWP, Montana DOT, and the National Wildlife Federation to install a beaver exclusion fence near Viking Creek to reduce flooding while supporting healthy wetland habitat.



WLI partnered with Whitefish High School art classes and the City of Whitefish to remind our community that what goes into the storm drains will reach our waterbodies.



A coyote paused for a quick photo opt in the Averill's Viking Creek Wetland Preserve.



Dr. Jared Grummer of Flathead Lake Biological Station spoke about Westslope cutthroat-rainbow trout hybridization at the April Science Quencher.



WLI Limnologist Cassie Roberts gave a talk on the Northwest Montana Lakes Network at the Montana Aquatic Research Colloquium.

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