

Who Can Prevent the Invasion?

By Joann Wallenburn, Clearwater Resource Council

Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) are non-native aquatic plants, animals, or microbes, that, when introduced into our lakes and streams thrive and out-compete the native organisms, disrupting the balance of the ecosystem and causing harm. In their native waters, there are biological controls such as predators or disease that keep these organisms in balance with their environments. In our waters, without those biological controls, they can spell disaster.

Once an invasive aquatic organism gets well established, it can be virtually impossible to eradicate it. The cost just to minimize the harm done is high and sometimes completely unrealistic. “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is a very fitting adage for AIS. The cost of treating Eurasian Water Milfoil (an invasive plant) in the Noxon Reservoir, and now also in many places in the Missouri River is good example. I have heard a figure, that for every one dollar spent on prevention, we save \$50 - \$75 of treatment that may not even be effective.

These organisms cannot move themselves over land to come and jump into our waters. They must hitch a ride from one water body to another. The most obvious means of transportation are boats, trailers and jet skis that move from one water body to another, but all forms of water recreation equipment are possible vectors (such as felt-soled waders, bait buckets). Consider also... seaplanes, firefighting equipment and road construction equipment that all can move across state lines and water bodies Even the family pet dog can be a vector, splashing around in a stream with “Didymo”, also known as rock snot, and then going with you to another fishing stream that doesn’t – well didn’t – have Didymo!

So, how do we prevent the introduction of AIS to our waters? The answer is simple: every body and every thing that enters our lakes and streams must be free of AIS. This is easier said than done. No reasonable person would want to be the one who introduces AIS to our waters. The best, most cost-effective means of prevention is to educate the public, so the public, that is you and me, will make the little effort it takes to make sure our boat, our waders, our bait bucket, our dog are free of AIS before they enter the water. The measures are simple..... Clean (wash with a clean source of water),

Drain (run the water out of bilges, sumps, and live wells), and Dry (make sure equipment is dried completely for x days before entering a new water body).

Monitoring is another tool in the fight against AIS. Not all introductions of AIS become an invasion. Early detection gives us the best chance to eradicate AIS before it gets established. The public can do some of the most basic, yet essential monitoring that is needed. Artificial substrate traps (PVC pipe on a rope) are used to monitor for early detection of zebra mussels. The more traps deployed on more lakes the better. The traps should be deployed in mid-summer and checked monthly thereafter by feeling for the grittiness of the newly forming mussel shells. Native mussels do not attach and won't be found on these traps. Another form of monitoring that can be done by the general public is to observe the plant life in the water. If you see something new and different from what was there before, it could be a problem and should be investigated. Veliger (microscopic juvenile zebra mussels) sampling is yet another monitoring tool to aid in the early detection of the mussels. Veliger sampling is costly and requires some expertise, but public assistance by providing an extra pair of hands or driving a boat can help get the job done.

The 2011 Montana legislature allocated \$600,000 for AIS work for the biennium and approved mandatory boat inspection stations. The goal is to have inspection stations at every port of entry to the state. In the Seeley/Swan, we are at risk not only from out-of-state boats, but also from boats traveling from the Missouri River, or the Noxon Reservoir. The Flathead AIS workgroup identified eight sites for boat inspection stations to protect the Flathead. The second-most critical site in their list is Clearwater Junction, with the first being US 93 south of Polson. The current plan is to have a seasonally permanent, mandatory boat inspection station at Clearwater Junction operating 7 days per week. A major source of funding for the inspection station is the Lolo National Forest, Seeley Lake Ranger District.

Also this spring, Missoula County Weed District (MCWD) personnel assembled a local coalition group, similar to the Flathead AIS workgroup. The Missoula group formed up quickly and includes several members from the Flathead group, along with the Clearwater Resource Council (CRC), Blackfoot Challenge, Clark Fork Coalition, Swan Ecosystem Center, MT FWP, MT DNRC, Powell County Weed District and Missoula County Weed

District. The Missoula group, along with the Flathead group, is having additional signs printed to post at public and private access points in our region. MCWD is funding a seasonal position to map aquatic weeds in many of the Clearwater River lakes. The Flathead group has also hired a private consultant to do some additional mapping in the Clearwater system.

CRC was recently awarded a grant of nearly \$7000 from the Lolo National Forest for AIS prevention work in the Seeley Lake Ranger District. CRC will use these funds to map aquatic vegetation on additional lakes, monitor for adult and juvenile forms of the zebra mussels, and continue public outreach and education efforts.

Many people from many agencies are engaged in the battle against AIS. Yet, the single most important person in this battle is YOU. To paraphrase Smokey the Bear, “Only YOU can prevent AIS”.

For further information on AIS or how you can help, please contact the Clearwater Resource Council at (406) 677-0069 or lakes@crcmt.org.