

## What Do We Do When We Find Eurasian Watermilfoil in Seeley Lake?

By Joann Wallenburn, Clearwater Resource Council

That was the question asked at the Early Detection Rapid Response workshop conducted by the Missoula County Weed District on April 12<sup>th</sup>. For us in Missoula County, this is, thankfully, a "what if" situation. We have a lot we can learn from the folks in Flathead County, who are dealing with the real thing. Eurasian Watermilfoil and other aquatic invaders cause harm to our water quality, damage our fish populations, and interfere with boating. If these AIS species get established here, people will not want to boat, swim or fish in our lakes.

There has been quite a bit of press lately about the discovery of Curlyleaf Pondweed in Flathead Lake and the lack of action to treat it. There was a report last summer of Eurasian Watermilfoil in the Eagle Bend Yacht Harbor, near Bigfork. When the experts examined the harbor, it was free of Eurasian Watermilfoil, but was infested with Curlyleaf Pondweed, which is on the Montana Noxious Weed List in the Priority 1B Class, "Management criteria will require eradication or containment..." Eagle Bend Yacht Harbor connects to the Flathead River above the lake through a man-made channel. Surveys of the river and Flathead Lake revealed the pondweed in the river as far as 10 miles upstream of the river mouth, and spot infestations in Lakeside and Bigfork.

Curlyleaf Pondweed is different than most other aquatic plants in that it grows during the winter and dies off in mid-summer. The best time to treat any plant is when it is growing. The channel has a dam to allow containment of the harbor, but not during high water. The plants in the harbor, behind the dam, could be treated with herbicides before the water rises too much. The window of opportunity to treat this infestation this year is rapidly disappearing.

The legal complexities of this situation are daunting and the fear of liability law suits on all sides is high. Who wants to be responsible for injecting herbicides into the water? I was surprised to learn that the county weed districts are responsible, under Montana law, for management of all noxious weeds, including aquatic invasive plants. The county weed districts are well accustomed to managing terrestrial invasive plants. Aquatic invasive plants are very different and very new to the scene.

Just to clarify, management does not mean treatment. The landowner is responsible for control of noxious weeds, aquatic or terrestrial, as outlined in the weed management

plan. The county is responsible for ensuring that the management plan is implemented and followed. So who owns the land under the water where the plants are growing?

We do not want to miss a window of opportunity to treat a new invader in our waters because we are not prepared. Representatives from the US Forest Service, Trout Unlimited, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Department of Agriculture, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Seeley Lake Water District, Clearwater Resource Council, Swan Ecosystem Center, plus members of the Missoula County Weed District and Board came together at this workshop to identify the issues and start development of strategies to follow should (when) we find an aquatic invasive species in Seeley Lake or one of our other lakes.

The specific scenario of the rapid response workshop is shown in the map. The theoretical infestation was found along the shoreline of Big Larch campground, on both sides of the boat launch and extended south along the shore of privately owned property. Approximately 2 acres north of the boat launch and 4-5 acres south of the boat launch were infested (theoretically!).

What do we do? The initial reaction in the group was to stop any further spread of the plant and to "close Seeley Lake." Hmmmm. Has anyone forgotten the economic hit to Seeley Lake during the Jocko Lakes fire of 2007? No one really complained about closing the lake then to allow firefighting aircraft to scoop water unhindered by pleasure craft. Most of the town was empty because of the evacuations anyway. Should we really close the lake for a plant?

After more discussion and consideration, it was decided, for this exercise, to buoy-off an area around the infestation, close the Big Larch boat launch and prohibit access to that area of the water from land (by swimmers, dogs, etc.) as well. Eurasian Watermilfoil spreads from plant fragments, so it should be left as undisturbed as possible until it can be treated. What is the cost of a mile of buoys?

If boaters are allowed to continue using Seeley Lake, it would be necessary to prevent the spread of the plant to other waters by watercraft leaving Seeley Lake. To do that, a light temporary quarantine could be invoked by the Montana Department of Agriculture, which would require all watercraft leaving Seeley Lake to be inspected and cleaned, if necessary. Two boat inspection stations would be needed to inspect boats heading north up 83 and those heading south down 83. Inspection stations cost upwards of \$35,000 per year - each.

None of this has addressed treatment, yet. How do we treat an aquatic invasive weed? The goal is eradication. There are three general categories of treatment: mechanical, chemical, and bottom barriers. Mechanical treatments, including hand-pulling and diver-dredging, cost roughly \$4500 per acre. Hand-pulling is only reasonable for infestations less than 1 acre. Diver-dredging could be used for the infestation presented in this exercise. Herbicides cost \$1000 per acre, and bottom barriers cost \$1 per square foot or approximately \$15,000 per acre.

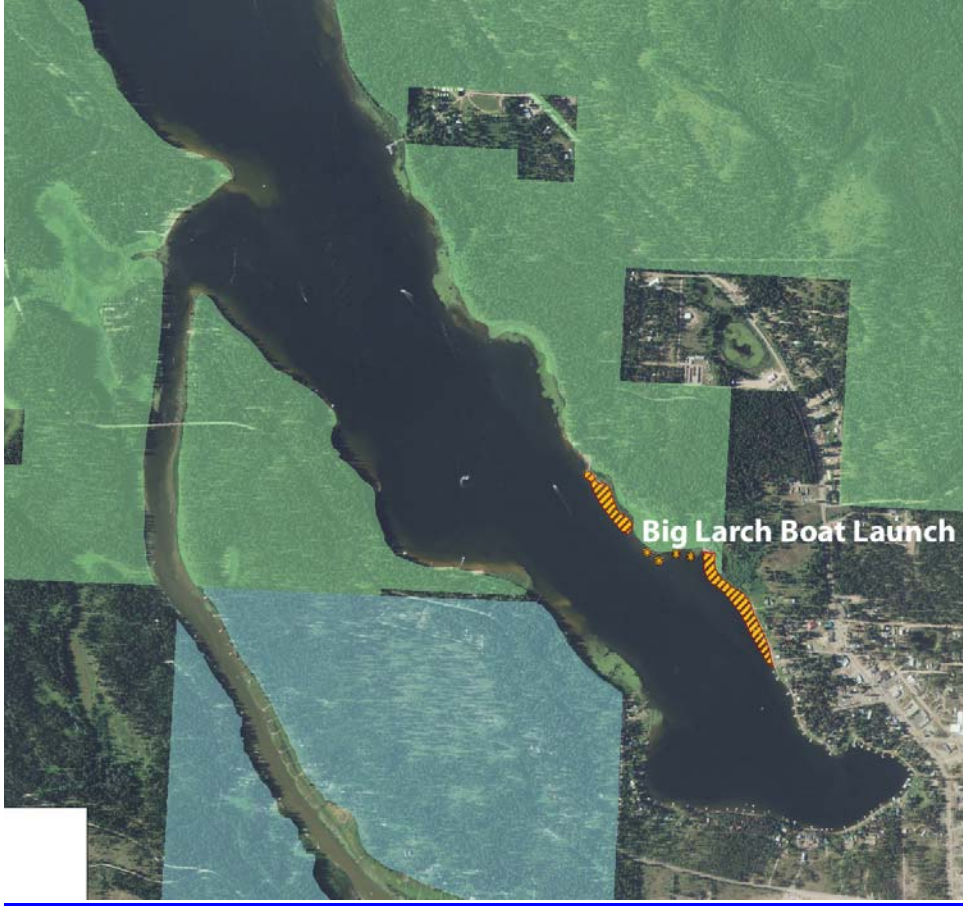
If all goes well, the treatment will take only three years. Realistically, we should plan on 5 years. The light temporary quarantine expires in 12 months. The Ag Department would have to create a more permanent management area for the 3-5 year duration in order to continue the quarantine. That gets complicated. Two inspection stations for 3-5 years are very expensive.

Many questions arose at the Missoula County Early Detection workshop. Who is responsible for treating the weeds? Who has the authority to treat the weeds in the lake? Who has the authority to buoy-off part of the lake? Who has the authority to close the boat launch and swimming area? Who relies on lake water for drinking water? How close to the intakes can we safely treat with chemicals? What chemicals? Or can we? When do we inform the public? Who informs the public? How do we inform the public? What do we say? And the really big question: who is going to pay for it?

There are still many questions to be identified and many more to be answered. The good news is that, in Missoula County, the many entities who will play a role have come together to identify the issues and start developing reasonable solutions that have been thought out in a period of calm, and not in the heat of battle.

Prevention is certainly the best answer. When that fails, early detection is the next best thing. Hopefully we will detect an invader before it covers hundreds of acres and will be prepared to act, act quickly, and act reasonably.

If you want to help with any of these areas: prevention, monitoring for early detection, rapid response, please call me at 210-8453 or send an email to [lakes@crcmt.org](mailto:lakes@crcmt.org).



**Big Larch Boat Launch**