

All hands on deck

Detection of a few microscopic animals has substantially altered natural resources management in Montana. Monitoring crews with FWP's Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Program discovered the minuscule larvae of invasive mussels last fall at Tiber Reservoir, about 60 miles north of Great Falls, and made "suspect" detections at Canyon Ferry Reservoir near Helena. The discovery had been dreaded for years.

Zebra mussels and their close relative, quagga mussels, have slowly been moving west after their discovery in the Great Lakes in 1988. Yet the appearance of either or both here—we don't know for sure which species of larvae was detected—alarmed those of us who help manage Montana's aquatic resources. This marks the first time the invasive mussels have shown up in Montana waters and is the closest they have come to reaching the Columbia River Basin.

Lacking natural predators, invasive mussels reproduce rapidly, by billions, quickly covering hard underwater surfaces. They clog irrigation, water supply, and hydropower intake pipes, creating costly problems for cities, farmers, ranchers, and power plants. They give boaters headaches by jamming motors and covering hulls. In their adult stage, the thumbnail-size mussels harm lake and river environments and fisheries by consuming vast amounts of tiny food particles needed by fish larvae and aquatic insects.

In states where invasive mussels are rampant, the species cost the public and private sectors tens of millions of dollars in damage each year.

Soon after detection of the mussel larvae last fall, Governor Steve Bullock declared a statewide natural resources emergency and formed an interagency mussel response team composed of FWP, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), and other agencies. By mid-January, the team had dispatched task forces to set up inspection and decontamination stations statewide, hire seasonal workers to operate the stations, and increase public outreach and education.

The first station, at Canyon Ferry, began operation in March. Statewide, more than 30 stations, twice as many as last year, will operate this spring and summer.

Meanwhile, FWP, DNRC, and other state and federal agencies remain in close contact with each other and with local communities, law-enforcement officials, and Montana legislators. The state has developed response plans for new infestations and will increase lake and river sampling this summer.

Public support for all of these measures has been overwhelmingly positive.

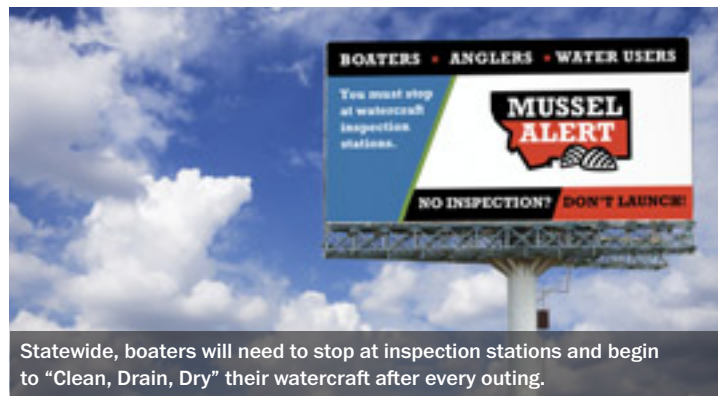
Invasive mussels spread mainly by hitching rides on boats and gear moved from one state to another. That's why FWP's AIS Program has operated mandatory watercraft inspection stations at key sites across the state since 2004. We have also widely promoted the need for boaters and anglers to "Clean, Drain, Dry" their boats and equipment with every use. Mussel-awareness billboards, posters, and PSAs

on TV and radio have become commonplace. And they've worked.

For more than a decade, FWP helped keep invasive mussels from reaching Montana waters, despite tens of thousands of boats entering each year from states with established mussel populations. Fortunately, detection crews were in place to catch the invasive mussels' arrival. Early detection gives Montana a much better chance of containing the spread, and buys time while new eradication science and technology are developed.

Now that invasive mussels are in Montana, the response team and its stakeholder partners will do all they can to manage the risk of the species spreading to other Montana waters—and to waters in the Columbia River Basin. FWP will adopt the response team's recommendations, such as doubling watercraft inspection and decontamination stations, building partnerships with local communities, working with stakeholders to build public trust and confidence, and soliciting federal funds to help with costs.

FWP is responsible for boat inspection and decontamination. You have my word that we will do everything in our power on that



Statewide, boaters will need to stop at inspection stations and begin to "Clean, Drain, Dry" their watercraft after every outing.

front. But we can't check every boat, and we won't close every lake and river to boating and angling. Boaters and anglers themselves must think and act differently. That will require patience while waiting in line at inspection stations, and getting into the do-it-yourself habit of cleaning, draining, and drying boats and equipment after every outing.

Changing the attitudes and behavior of hundreds of thousands of anglers and boaters won't be easy. It will require the resources and influence of everyone concerned about the threat of invasive mussels—including tribes, communities, outfitters, hydropower and agriculture interests, fish conservation groups, businesses, and state and federal agencies.

Montana is in full-response mode against an invasive species that threatens our recreation, economy, and aquatic ecosystems. It's all hands on deck.

—**Martha Williams**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks