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They joined the chorus to fight invaders

Strange summer weather and looming shutdown complicate the battle against invasive species on area lakes

Kathleen Pakarinen
Columnist

"You're preaching to the choir."

That's what one member of the audience told Department of Natural Resources Invasive Species Specialist Dan Swanson at the informational meeting on invasive species that was held at Hazelton Town Hall on June 28. He got no argument on that point from any of the 35 people in the audience/chorus.



DNR Invasive Species Specialist Dan Swanson (left) and Area Fisheries Supervisor Rick Bruesewitz

His question and theirs was, "How do we get the word out to everyone else who uses the lakes in the Aitkin and Brainerd areas?"

Swanson is based in the Brainerd office. Also at the meeting to take questions was Area Fisheries Supervisor Rick Bruesewitz who is based in Aitkin. The program was sponsored by the Mille Lacs Lake Management Watershed Group, the Aitkin County Water Planning Task Force and the DNR.

"We want to stop aquatic hitchhikers, non-native organisms that can cause economic loss and environmental damage - that can threaten our natural resources and, even in some cases, human health," Swanson said before delivering a power point presentation that detailed a long list of invasives and the damage they can cause.

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They included curly leaf pond weed, Eurasian watermilfoil, Asian carp, zebra mussels, spiny waterfleas, flowering rush, faucet snails and viral hemorrhagic septicemia. That last invasive is a virus that infects fish, found so far in Lake Superior and the St. Louis River. Invasives that have found their way to Mille Lacs Lake include zebra mussels, spiny water fleas and Eurasian watermilfoil. Swanson even touched on species that are not in the state yet like northern snakehead hydrilla, a plant that can have serious impacts on lakes, currently found in Indiana and Ohio.

Prevention is key

"Prevention is key," Swanson said, explaining that once a population of invasives is established, it is virtually impossible to eradicate. The only option left, he said, is to manage the problem.

He and Bruesewitz both emphasized that docks and lifts pose the highest risks for transportation of invasive species from one body of water to another.

"It's kind of like buying a ready-made spawning population," Bruesewitz said about purchasing a used dock from one lake and placing it in another.

He and Swanson both highly recommended letting the Minnesota winter provide the protection and prevention.

"If you purchase a used lift or dock, let it sit through the winter on shore before putting it in the lake ... don't put it in the water the same year you buy it," Swanson said.

Everyone in the room seemed to agree with Swanson's assertion that "prevention is key." The question is "How?"

Swanson advised that access signs are available, free of charge for private lake accesses. And regulations are changing like the watercraft and bait container draining laws that were revised last month in Minnesota.

Now, Swanson said, the law states that water from any lake in the state may not be transported to anywhere else in the state.

"If you haven't pulled the plug, you're in violation of the law," Swanson said.

Bait containers and live wells must also be drained before anglers leave accesses. If they want to transport live bait, he explained, they need to have an alternate source of water that was

transported in their vehicles, not in their boats.

Partners are needed

"We need partners ... we're trying to educate the public ... the DNR can't do it alone ... anglers and boaters have to take personal responsibility," he emphasized.

The DNR's multi-pronged approach to prevention includes regulation, enforcement, watercraft inspections, public awareness and grants that are available to partners like lake associations.

One audience member suggested making a written test on invasive species mandatory for people seeking boat licenses. The idea received general agreement from the rest of the people in the room.

Another asked about the long-term effects of zebra mussels on Mille Lacs.

"We don't know exactly how it will play out," Bruesewitz said. He mentioned increased water clarity as one result that could benefit some fish species (small mouth bass and northern) and harm others (walleye).

He and Swanson agreed that certain species can cause big problems for certain areas of certain lakes and be relatively easy to manage on other lakes.

An audience member cited a study that estimated a cost of about \$1,000 per year per lakeshore resident for managing invasives in the near future.

Strange days

And none of it takes into account the strange year we're having - a summer featuring roller-coaster weather and a looming government shutdown.

"This year, everything out in the wild is confused. They don't know if it's spring, summer or fall," Bruesewitz said in response to a question about a lack of fish flies on one area lake.

When asked about inspections on accesses during the shutdown, Bruesewitz said, "Work on state property cannot be done during a shutdown."

If state grant funding is not involved, he and Swanson believed that inspections could continue, at least on private accesses but Swanson said directions from the state are changing about as

quickly as the weather.

"It's the biggest mess I've ever seen," he said.

His parting words of advice to the "chorus" focused on contacting state legislators and letting them know how they feel about issues that range from the species invading their lakes to the shutdown that could hamper their prevention measures at the height of the season.

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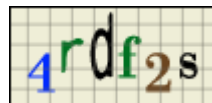
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