



THE BOAT STOPS HERE FWP aquatic invasive species inspectors at Canyon Ferry begin an inspection process to ensure boats entering and exiting the popular reservoir are not carrying tiny plants and animals that could create costly damage to fisheries, agriculture, and industry.

Meet the AIS “Pit Crews”

With the speed and professionalism of NASCAR support teams, aquatic invasive species inspectors make sure boaters don’t transport unwanted plants and animals into Montana’s lakes, reservoirs, and rivers.

By TOM DICKSON. Photos by JOHN WARNER

We know that summer has truly arrived in Montana when “STOP: Watercraft Inspection Ahead” signs spring up along motorways across the state. These inspection stations, operating since 2004, have proliferated over the past few years. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and other agencies have increased efforts to prevent boats from transporting aquatic invasive species (AIS) such as foreign mussels, Eurasian watermilfoil and New

Zealand mud snails into Montana waters. The non-native plants and animals, which hitchhike on boats, motors, trailers and other equipment, can invade lakes and rivers and cause costly problems for fisheries, irrigation, and hydropower facilities.

“Moving AIS around is a human-caused problem that’s preventable,” says Thomas Woolf, chief of FWP’s Aquatic Invasive Species Bureau. “Boaters need to do their part to clean their boats and gear to protect

Montana’s valuable waters.”

Most inspection stations are staffed with FWP watercraft inspectors, seasonal employees trained to provide fast, thorough, and efficient inspection. .

Billings photographer John Warner, who shot these photos at a busy inspection station at Canyon Ferry Reservoir last summer, says he was struck by the inspectors’ speed and professionalism. “When a boat pulled in, they were like a NASCAR pit crew, going to their

stations and each doing their specific task, whether it was the interview, the inspection, or using the [decontamination] sprayers.”

In 2018, more than 40 inspection stations are set up at key locations. State law requires that all watercraft entering Montana, crossing the Continental Divide, and entering the Flathead Basin with intent to launch must be inspected.

FWP inspections occur at 17 roadside stations, eight decontamination stations at Canyon Ferry and Tiber, and 10 regional and area offices. Additional stations are run by other agencies and organizations in partnership with FWP.

During a watercraft inspection, which usually takes less than 10 minutes, an inspector interviews the boater to determine the likelihood that the vessel is transporting AIS. Low-risk boats, which have previously been cleaned, drained, and dried, receive proof of

inspection and a seal. High-risk boats (those containing standing water, weeds, or mud or arriving from a state, province, or waterbody containing invasive mussels) are decontaminated with a high-pressure washer in a process that takes from five to 30 minutes depending on the vessel.

“Boaters can really speed things along if they arrive at the inspection station already cleaned, drained, and dried,” says Liz Lodman, information officer FWP’s AIS Bureau. Lodman also urges fly anglers to clean and dry their felt-bottom wading boots and other fishing gear between outings.

FWP cooperates with neighboring states and provinces on AIS control, and it works with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe, Blackfoot Tribe, Missoula County, Garfield County Conservation District, Whitefish Lake Institute, Glacier National Park, and Bighorn Canyon National Recre-

ation Area to ensure that procedures at watercraft inspection stations are consistent.

The inspections pay off. Sixteen of the 71,000 vessels inspected in 2017 contained invasive mussels and were decontaminated before they could enter Montana waters. Already in 2018, FWP watercraft inspection stations have intercepted several out-of-state boats carrying zebra mussels.

Just like applying sunscreen, keeping your boat free of aquatic invasive species is now a permanent facet of summer in Montana. “Many states and provinces have AIS that could eventually make their way to Montana, so the problem is never going away,” says Lodman. “Cleaning, draining, and drying your boat and gear after every trip is now the new normal.”

► For more on inspection station hours and locations, visit cleandraindrymt.com.



◀ On summer afternoons, boats line up at the Silos Fishing Access Site on Canyon Ferry, where FWP has set up a decontamination station. Because existence of invasive mussels was suspected on the reservoir, state law requires that boats leaving the water be thoroughly cleaned, drained, and dried—and, if necessary, decontaminated—before traveling elsewhere. Zach Crete with the FWP Aquatic Invasive Species Program, says the department sets up several lanes at the site to accommodate boats requiring different levels of inspection and decontamination. “We try to make the process as fast and efficient as possible while still being sure the inspections are thorough,” he says.



▲ Crew members greet boaters coming off the reservoir and explain the inspection process. Most boaters already know the drill. Many clean off all vegetation and mud, drain their livewell and transom, and dry their boat and motor before arrival. This speeds up the inspection and gets them back on the road.

Daryl Miller (center), Reid Smith (right), and other crew members wait for an owner to lower his motor for inspection. ▶



◀ A couple from Billings watches an inspector open the hatch of their jet ski to flush out the bilge with hot water.

Inspectors attach seals to boat hitches, certifying that the vessel has been inspected. If unbroken, the seals also indicate to FWP game wardens and other officials that the boat has not entered any water since inspection. ▶



Reid Smith and Kathi Montgomery wrap up an inspection by going through a detailed checklist to ensure that every part of the boat, motor, and trailer has been examined and cleaned. Inspectors even check anchors, anchor lines, life jackets, livewells, and any other places that could be damp or wet and contain invasives. ▼



▲ Reid Smith flushes hot water through a motor to kill any invasive species in the cooling system. The water enters through “ earmuffs” attached to the lower unit. Water temperatures vary from 120 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit depending on what is being flushed.



◀ The crew takes a quick break in the shade before more boaters arrive for inspection. The busiest times at inspections stations are weekends and holidays, especially afternoons. FWP operates station throughout the day in case boaters come off the water early and require inspection.

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▶ Natalie Abbott gives some Montana love to a patient passenger. “Our inspectors understand that people—and their pets—just want to get home after a day on the water,” says Zach Crete, an AIS Program official. “They appreciate that boaters understand how important inspections are for protecting Montana’s waters.”