

Frequently Asked Questions

Asian Clam Eradication and Lake Elmo Habitat and Access Improvement Project

Invasive Species

Why is the lake being drained? The lake is being drained because an aquatic invasive species (AIS), the Asian clam, was found in Lake Elmo in the summer of 2019. Currently, Lake Elmo has the only documented population of Asian clams in the state of Montana.

Why are the clams bad? Asian clams are biofoulers which are plants and animals that accumulate on underwater surfaces and negatively influence human activities and infrastructure. For instance, the clams clog irrigation canals, intake pipes, and water treatment facilities. They also alter lakebeds and outcompete other species, like fish and turtles, for limited resources such as food. Additionally, their process of feeding and excreting can alter the organisms living in the water column and cause an overgrowth of harmful algae.

I have been finding clams in Lake Elmo since the 1970s, why are you draining it now?

Although there are native clams and mussels, this is the first documentation of an invasive clam in Lake Elmo. Asian clams are small (between ¼” and 2” across) with brownish-tan shells (may have some black coloring) and have distinct ridges ‘bumps’ that are easily felt. The shells of the invasive clams are very hard and will not break under finger-strength pressure.

What are the native clams and mussels? There are native giant floaters mussels at Lake Elmo which are common at Lake Elmo and much larger than Asian clams. Also, native to Lake Elmo is the tiny peaclam. Not as abundant as the giant floater mussel, the tiny peaclam is usually smaller than an adult’s fingernail, cream colored, and has a fragile and more oval-shaped smooth shell than the Asian clam.



Native giant floater mussel



Invasive Asian clam

Do the clams stick to boats? No, Asian clams live in the sediment, like Montana’s native mussel and clam species. Only the invasive Dreissenid mussels (zebra and quagga mussels) use byssal threads to attach to boats and other substrates. However, like invasive Dreissenid mussels,

the larval Asian clams could potentially be moved around by boaters who do not properly clean, drain and dry their boats and equipment.

Are the clams in other areas around Lake Elmo? Not as far as we know. FWP has sampled the Lake Elmo system thoroughly and routinely surveys waters in the area for invasive species and no other populations of Asian clams have been detected. Which is why it is so important now to control this isolated population before their population increases and distributes to other water bodies.

How did Asian clams get in Lake Elmo? The exact source is unknown, though the most likely method is either a ‘bait bucket’ transfer, accidental (came in on equipment that was not clean), or an intentional introduction (illegal aquarium dump).

Won’t draining the lake just move the clams downstream? Not likely. The water in the lake moves through the irrigation system and FWP has yet to find a clam in the ditch or in downstream waterbodies. The irrigation ditch is completely dry several times a year (once in the summer and again throughout the winter). The drying coupled with the poor habitat in the ditch has probably prevented the clams from spreading, so far. Also, FWP plans to drain the lake starting in the fall when the juveniles have likely settled into the lake sediment and are less likely to be in the water column.

How can I prevent the spread of Asian clams? Be sure to follow the three steps of “Clean. Drain. Dry” for all equipment used at Lake Elmo. Aquatic invasive species can be transported on watercraft, fishing gear, and swimming toys. And please, never move live aquatic species or dump aquarium tanks into natural waterways.

Lake Elmo State Park

Will the park be closed? No, though parts of the parks may be closed at time due to construction activities and safety concerns. The lakebed will be closed during the drawdown.

Will I be able to use the trail? Yes, though again, parts of the trail might be closed at times.

Will there be access improvements for people with disabilities? Yes, the fishing jetty near the parking lot and the new trail along Lake Elmo Drive are planned to have concrete surfaces which will be American with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible. If the south jetty is built, it will have a slope that follows ADA guidelines with a gravel path.

What will you do at the dog park? If funds allow, we plan to update the dog park. Pending available funds, the shoreline and edges will be reshaped to improve access and aesthetics.

Are the clams dangerous for dogs? No.

Will you be fixing the ice fishing access by the office? Yes, a hard surfaced ramp to allow ice fishing equipment access in the winter and the hand launch of kayaks and other small watercraft in the summer is planned to be constructed.

What are the boating rules? The boating rules remain the same with electric trolling motors only. Gasoline-powered motorboats will be allowed only on May 15th and 22nd from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Looking for things

Can we use metal detectors to find lost rings and objects? No, the lakebed will be a restricted area during full drawdown to exclude the public from getting stuck in muddy sediments and to prevent Asian clams from being inadvertently transferred from the site on boots and waders to other waterbodies.



Public fishing at Lake Elmo

Will you lift limits on the fishery? Anglers will be able to catch and keep as many fish as they want starting May 1st, 2021 at Lake Elmo in Billings. All creel and fish-length limits have been removed for the remainder of 2021.

Will you let people fish without a license? No, anglers must purchase a fishing license to fish at Lake Elmo and adhere to other rules and laws set by fishing and park regulations.

Since the limits have been lifted, can a bow and arrow or spear be used to fish? No, all methods of take remain the same as listed in the fishing regulations.

Can you trap and move the fish? No, the fish can ingest the clams and pass them alive. If the fish are transported alive, they will likely spread the clams to other waterbodies.

What will happen to the fish in the pond? Hopefully, most of the fish will be caught and kept before the lake is drained. Some fish will be sent to Zoo Montana, the Yellowstone Center (Red Lodge) and possibly Montana Wild as food for the animals. Beginning in September 2021, FWP staff will collect, euthanized, and freeze fish for seven days before delivery to prevent the spread of clams. Any remaining fish will have to be left in place.

Will I be able to ice fish at Lake Elmo next winter (December 2021–March 2022)? No, the lake will be empty.

Where else can I fish that's close by while Lake Elmo is not available? There are several fisheries around Billings including Joel's Pond, Riverfront Park, and Laurel Pond.

Can you save the trophy fish? No, unfortunately.

Will you stock fish in 2021? Yes, but only spring stocks of trout. The trout are stocked for a put-and-take fishery and generally do not survive the warm summer water temperatures.

What is the fish stocking plan for after the lake is filled? The stocking plan is currently in development, but we plan to stock the lake with sport fish like bass, sunfish, and Channel Catfish.

What kind of fisheries-related improvements are you planning to do? We will be building one to two fishing jetties (with one being ADA compliant) that will improve angler access to deeper water. We also plan to add habitat features while the lakebed is dry that will encourage fish spawning and rearing like spawning gravels, catfish condos, and aquatic vegetation.

Birds and animals at Lake Elmo

What will happen to the ducks and geese, osprey, bald eagles? In the summer, we expect no changes to the bird population. As the pond drains, it is likely that birds of prey like Osprey and eagles will feed on the remaining fish. In the winter, the birds will likely end up at other waterbodies.

What will happen to the turtles? Like other species, turtles may move and end up elsewhere. Staff at FWP are working on a plan to potentially overwinter painted and soft-shelled turtles in a closed environment and reintroduce them once the lake is refilled.

What will happen to the native mussels? There is the potential for some to be held in a closed system over the winter and used to restock once the lake refills.

Project timeline

When will the water start to be taken out? Starting around September 1, 2021 the draw down will begin and will take 40 or more days.

When will it be refilled? The lake will likely be refilled by the end of May 2022. The refill will start between April 15th, 2022 and May 10th, 2022.

How will irrigation be affected? Irrigators will likely not be disrupted as we are planning for a full irrigation season that includes the spring refill. Flows will be available in the spring from 12 feet to the surface.