

Plugging the Leaks

A worrisome incident in September 2019 highlights the need for Montana to continue improving watercraft inspections. **By Jim Pashby**

In late September 2019, a boat from Chicago infested with invasive mussels slipped through two Montana inspection stations before inspectors with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) intercepted it in Ravalli and decontaminated the vessel.

“We were extremely concerned that the boat’s mussels escaped detection,” says Thomas Woolf, bureau chief of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks’ Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Program. “After that, we knew we needed to take even more steps to improve quality control at inspection stations.”

The driver hauling the infested boat was headed for Seattle and stopped at Montana watercraft inspection stations in Wibaux and Anaconda, where crews failed to spot the mussels. Montana’s AIS protocol requires that a contaminated vessel be decontaminated with hot water to remove and kill invasive species before it can leave an AIS check station.

In 2019, inspectors with FWP, tribes, conservation and weed districts, and other entities checked more than 113,000 boats. They discovered invasive mussels on 16, all of which were decontaminated.

So how did the Chicago boat slip through Montana’s line of defense?

The inspector at the Wibaux AIS station, on I-94 near the North Dakota border, failed to inspect the boat properly yet provided paperwork to the driver indicating the craft was clean, Woolf explains. When the driver stopped at the Anaconda station, inspectors

reviewed the paperwork and allowed the boat to proceed without inspection. “When inspectors encounter a boat already inspected at another Montana station, they don’t perform another full inspection but are still supposed to look at the boat to ensure it’s clean. That didn’t happen,” Woolf says.

When the boat reached the Ravalli AIS station, inspectors followed protocols and identified mussels on the boat. They decontaminated the craft and notified the state of Washington so it could be examined again after reaching its destination.

Woolf says the incident highlights the challenges of managing watercraft inspection stations in a large, rural state. “Our inspectors are seasonal employees working long days in remote areas with minimal supervision,” he says. “Most do outstanding work in tough conditions interacting with boat owners—who sometimes aren’t happy about having to stop for an inspection. It’s not easy making sure every inspector follows protocols correctly every time, all season long.”

Until recently, regional AIS supervisors were responsible for overseeing dozens of inspectors at multiple stations, sometimes hundreds of miles apart. “For instance, the eastern supervisor managed five stations covering an area the size of the state of Washington,” Woolf says. FWP has now begun contracting with local entities like conservation districts to manage many of the stations. “This encourages local ownership in the issue and allows expanded oversight and improved quality control,” Woolf says. FWP is also contracting with the CSKT to operate two stations on the Flathead Indian Reservation.

As part of improvements already scheduled when the September incident occurred, the department is also updating and enhancing inspector training, adding supervision and quality control requirements, and surveying boat owners about their experiences at stations.

“The reality of watercraft inspection stations is that we rely heavily on individual inspectors to do their job every single time,” says Woolf. “We have a great team and many great inspectors who are pulling hard to make things work the best they possibly can. But like anyone, an inspector can have a bad day and make a mistake. Even so, we’re taking steps this season to tighten things up even more to protect Montana waters from harmful invasives.” 🐼

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