



Mille Lacs Lake Watershed Management Group

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Topic of the Month - April 2018

Aquatic Invasive Species (what can we do?)

Steve Hughes, Aitkin County AIS Coordinator

As we enter our 4th summer of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) prevention efforts, it is good to reflect back on where we started and how this program has evolved. In 2014 the MN State Legislature began distributing funding to counties based upon a formula that includes the number of public accesses in a county and the number of parking spaces at those accesses. Aitkin County ranks in the top 10 counties in the State for public accesses to lakes and rivers. Aitkin County receives about \$275,000 annually to be used to stop or slow the spread of AIS.



Enjoying a beautiful evening on the lake:

In September 2014 Aitkin County received about \$125,000 to begin an Aquatic Invasive Species prevention program in Aitkin County. That initial funding was used to purchase 3 decontamination units on trailers that are placed at various public landings. In addition, we purchased equipment for AIS Inspectors to use such as safety vests, coolers, shirts, hats, etc.

In 2015 we started to implement our AIS Plan which includes education, inspections, enforcement, rapid response funds for new AIS discoveries, maintenance of AIS equipment, and administration/coordination. In 2016 we increased inspection hours to about 420 hours per access and increased our covered accesses to 16 full coverage and 4 to 6 partial coverage. We operated 3 hot water decontamination units. We completed about 10,000 inspections from mid-May thru early-September. All of the numbers reflect increases over 2015. No boats with zebra mussels were found in 2016. Some invasive plants were found. Education continues to be our highest priority. In 2016 we staffed the Governor's Fishing Opener in the Big Sandy area with additional inspectors and 1 extra decontamination unit. In 2016 the Aitkin County Sheriff's office greatly increased their involvement with education of boaters and roadside inspections. DNR Conservation Officer support remains very strong.

In 2017 we added 2 additional lakes and hired 26 inspectors for the summer. The majority of the approximately \$275,000 funding for Aitkin County per year is spent on inspections.

Our goal for 2018 is 30 inspectors. We will have inspectors at the major accesses in the county, we will have the decontamination units operating, and we will continue to provide education about AIS to as many lake users as possible.

We recently applied to fund an innovative project to provide clean water for fishermen to change their bait water when they are leaving the waterbody. This funding is being provided through the MN Initiative Foundation. It is unlawful to transport water from Minnesota lakes and rivers or to release bait into the water. A project regarding this issue will begin in May, 2018. Bait shops and resorts in Aitkin County will give one gallon of fresh water to those who buy bait. This project specifically focuses on slowing the spread of AIS such as spiny waterflea, zebra mussels, invasive plants, and starry stonewort. To encourage boaters to return the bag after use, \$.50 cash will be paid for the bag or \$1.00 off any artificial bait in the store. The plastic bag features information to educate users on methods to slow the spread of AIS. This project is designed to promote sustainable practices by recycling the bag as well as preserving the consumer's bait. More importantly, the goal of this project is to educate boaters about AIS and to prevent their spread throughout Aitkin County and Minnesota.

Each year we start boat inspections on the Friday before the fishing opener and we inspect through Labor Day. In July, we sample ten of our larger lakes for Zebra Mussel veligers (young). We continue to sample and analyze lakes for available calcium which may be a limiting factor for Zebra Mussel populations.

Our existing inspection schedule covers Friday afternoons, Saturday, Sunday, and the summer holidays. We try to match the available funds with the days and hours when the highest number of boaters can be reached and educated.

In late 2015 one of our Big Sandy Lake inspectors stopped the launch of a fishing boat that had hundreds of live zebra mussels attached. A Conservation Officer was called and the boat was sent to a decontamination station. The owner received a hefty fine for the transport of aquatic invasives. It is sobering to consider the damage that one boat could have caused to a large beautiful lake.

Do AIS prevention efforts matter? We are convinced that they do!

If you have questions or need more information please contact Steve Hughes @ (218) 927-6565 or hughes.aitkinswcd@gmail.com.