

Milfoil problem growing in Idaho's lakes

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Pend Oreille, Hayden infested

Boise—Lurking just beneath the surface of some lakes is a \$4 million a year problem, which could easily blossom into a \$60 million problem in as little as four years, said Rep. Eric Anderson, R-Priest Lake.

"This is potentially the biggest environmental hazard ever to face Idaho," Anderson said Thursday.

Anderson attended the House briefing from the Idaho State Department of Agriculture at the Caption building Thursday where Noxious Weed Program Manager Matt Voile debriefed lawmakers on the Eurasian milfoil invasion.

"It's a statewide issue. We need to tackle every lake simultaneously," Anderson said. "The problem is its underwater and we can't see it. If this was on the surface, we'd be nuking the stuff."

Voile said the results of a three-year study released last week indicate Idaho's lakes are significantly more at risk from the invasive aquatic plant than previously believed.

Voile said lakes in North Idaho are particularly at risk because of conditions conducive to the weed's growth and since it already has a foothold.

"The ones who stand to be most heavily impacted are in North Idaho, Voile said. "They rebounded from losing most of their timber industry mostly with tourism. Now, that recreation vitality is being threatened."

He said about 18 percent of Hayden Lake's surface area—about 715 acres—is already contaminated, citing the study completed in cooperation with a state noxious weed task force and the University of Idaho.

Treatment for Hayden Lake alone would cost about \$2.15 million, he said. Treatment of all the lakes in Idaho would cost about \$4 million a year and would be necessary for three years for a total of \$12 million.

"I know \$4 million is big, but it's just going to get bigger," Voile said.

Watermilfoil has been in Idaho eight to 10 years, Voile said. It spreads rapidly, with fragments tangled up in boat propellers being transported from lake to lake. The fragments can easily grow into colonies that form large mats that eventually float to the surface and prevent light from reaching native aquatic plants.

"It disrupts the entire native community underwater," Voile said. He added that when it comes to native fish like bull trout, watermilfoil "just chokes them out."

Voile showed legislators pictures of Lake Pend Oreille and Hayden Lake, where "Eurasian milfoil has successfully killed out all native species in that area."

"We have confirmed 2,200 acres in the Pend Oreille," Voile said.

Anderson spent the summer on his own time taking about 100 pictures of the plant in various lakes in Idaho and said if he could accomplish just one thing as a legislator it would be to help eradicate watermilfoil.

"I believe it will be a real economic loss if we don't do something," Anderson said.