

State Legislature

Funds to fight milfoil OK'd

Finance panel approves \$35.3 million for various projects

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BOISE – Idaho should spend \$4 million next year to eradicate milfoil from lakes and other waterways, legislative budget writers decided unanimously Wednesday.

"This \$4 million will give us an excellent start if we do it this year," said Rep. Frank Henderson, R-Post Falls. "Every year we delay it's going to multiply fairly rapidly."

Rep. Cliff Bayer, R-Boise, agreed. "This is really quite important in the sense of the timing – addressing this aggressively and thoroughly is the right thing to do," he said.

Added Rep. George Eskridge, R-Dover: "This is a statewide issue; it's a very serious one. ... If we don't get control of it this year, it's going to increase dramatically in cost."

The anti-milfoil funding came as the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee approved \$35.3 million in spending on various parks, economic development and other projects as part of an end-of-session funding bill titled the "Strengthening Idaho Act of 2006." The panel met into the evening Wednesday in an attempt to finish the bill but didn't quite finish and likely will meet again today. There's just under \$15 million left in next year's budget that the committee could spend.

In addition to the governor's "Experience Idaho" parks initiative, the bill includes – so far – 14 individual projects. Those range from \$5 million in matching grants to telecommunication companies, Internet providers and cable firms to expand rural broadband connections, to \$54,200 for water quality monitoring in the Clark Fork River and Lake Pend Oreille to track impacts of the proposed Rock Creek Mine and removal of the Milltown Dam. Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, pushed for the monitoring funds.

When Rep. Kathy Skippen, R-Emmett, made a pitch to include funding for a free clinic in Caldwell, Sen. Brent Hill, R-Rexburg, had had enough.

"I missed the meeting where we were invited to come and bring our pet project," he declared. "I don't have anything on the list. ... Others seem to have several things. ... We're looking at specific projects."

Senate Finance Chairman Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, noted that the joint committee has held \$50 million all session in anticipation of the end-of-session funding bill. Gov. Dirk Kempthorne had proposed that amount to send every man, woman and child in the state a

\$50 energy rebate. Lawmakers decided they'd rather use the money for economic development and other key projects.

Rep. Margaret Henbest, D-Boise, also raised questions about the process early in the day. She noted that after the parks initiative, which was handled first, the list of possible items to fund included an array of items that weren't even in the original agency budget requests this year. But two major items that still are pending – expanding community college classes to unserved areas of the state and funding high school curriculum redesign – aren't even on the list for consideration.

"I have a lot of problem giving out gifts, if you will, when there is serious, fundamental work of government that remains to be done," Henbest told the committee.

Yet the very first item considered after that – the \$5 million in broadband matching grants – won Henbest's support and passed on a 15-5 vote.

Here are the other items approved for funding thus far:

- \$300,000 for the TechConnect program, to help startup technology businesses.
- \$1 million for new grants to bring jobs paying at least \$12 an hour to cities with populations of fewer than 20,000.
- \$5 million for revolving loans to improve rural short-line railroad infrastructure.
- \$2 million for a pilot project to make loans to people training to be nurses or truck drivers.
- \$200,000 to help rural communities with growth planning issues.
- \$650,000 for a matching grant for a free clinic in Caldwell
- \$160,000 for water quality projects by the Soil Conservation Commission.
- \$50,000 for the Treasure Valley Air Quality Council.
- \$5 million for the state match for the federal Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, to take irrigated Eastern Snake Plain farmland out of production.
- \$300,000 for the Idaho Water Resource Board for water management.
- \$50,000 for matching funds for a study of the Bear River.