

Region's agencies ready to boost battle against milfoil

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Bonner County's grant is largest in the state

HAYDEN -- Agencies in charge of Hayden Lake and Lake Pend Oreille are about to kick up their efforts in the battle against Eurasian water milfoil.

Bonner County has been treating 50 to 55 acres a year on Lake Pend Oreille for the last five years for a problem that has grown from 200 acres to cover about 4,000 acres in the same time period. With a recent influx of \$4 million over two years from the state Legislature, this year Bonner County is tackling the whole 4,000 acres.

"We have, by far, the largest grant in the state," Brad Bluemer, weed supervisor for the Bonner County Public Works Weed Department, said of the \$1.6 million grant his department received to battle the noxious weed.

Bluemer said for the Legislature to take a problem head on as quickly as it did is "shocking."

"It's mindboggling. We never thought the Legislature would approve this much funding," Bluemer said. "It's never been known to take on a the weed control issue with such swiftness - in my lifetime at least. I feel honored to be a part of it."

The Legislature's quick action was due to how quickly the invasive aquatic weed spreads and how much damage it can do, Bluemer said. Milfoil can choke out native species and the "mat" it forms on the top of the water can feel like a wall if boaters run into it.

"It suffocates fish and kills people. People drown in it," Bluemer said. "There is nothing but complete chaos and hazard done by this weed."

County weed agencies for both Lake Pend Oreille and Hayden Lake have been granted permits from the Department of Environmental Quality to treat with herbicides. Bonner County will be using the herbicides Sonar and 2,4-D on Lake Pend Oreille with a target date of July 10.

Nina Eckberg, Kootenai County Noxious Weed Control superintendent, said her department will start applying the herbicides 2,4-D and triclopyr to Hayden Lake beginning Monday. Caution signs will be posted since drinking the water and irrigating is restricted for five days after it's applied. Eckberg's department usually treats about 100 acres on Hayden Lake every year, which currently has 400 to 500 acres of infestation.

With the \$306,000 Kootenai County received from a state grant this year, Eckberg said, they hope to treat 300 acres.

"We've never had a chance to treat the real dense infestation on the lake as we'd like," Eckberg said. "Last year you could barely boat through Sportsman's Bay because there were already milfoil flowers blooming on the surface."

She said they plan to use divers with underwater devices that act like vacuums and a barricade system that blocks sunlight from reaching the weed as well as the herbicides.

Barry Rosenberg, director of the Kootenai Environmental Alliance, said his group has a "high level of concern" over the use of herbicides, but will wait until the board's next meeting to decide whether it is against the use of herbicides -- particularly 2,4-D.

"Unless they can guarantee these things will not have any adverse effects they shouldn't be using it," Rosenberg said. "DEQ signed off on Burlington Northern (building a depot on the aquifer). I respect DEQ's opinion, but it doesn't alleviate our concerns in this case."

Rosenberg added that Lake Pend Oreille is the home to bull trout -- a protected species -- and he was worried about the impact on the fish.

Bluemer said those concerns were overblown.

"About everyone who lives and recreates on the water is very much in support of this plan," Bluemer said. "Until someone comes up with a better plan, this is what we're going to do."