

# Legislation targets invasive aquatic species

By BEN NEARY - Associated Press writer | Posted: Wednesday, January 13, 2010 12:00 am |

CHEYENNE -- A Wyoming legislative committee charged with overseeing wildlife and recreation said the state must take swift action to prevent exotic mussels from infesting state waters.

The committee is sponsoring legislation that would give the Wyoming Game and Fish Department \$2.5 million to establish stations to check boats before they're launched to make sure they're not carrying zebra and quagga mussels.

Authorities believe the mussels came to North America from overseas in the ballast water of ships. They've recently been found in reservoirs in Colorado, Utah and Nevada.

Though Wyoming state government is facing tough financial times, leaders of the joint Travel, Recreation, Wildlife and Cultural Resources Interim Committee said the state has no choice but to respond to the threat.

"The committee was unanimous in its concern for invasive aquatic species," said committee co-chairman Sen. Bruce Burns, R-Sheridan. "The question is how much can the state afford to spend on it. The need to do something is mandatory."

The mussels breed quickly and can clog waterworks. They also pose a threat to native fish and wildlife by consuming plankton and nutrients that native species rely on.

Burns said the committee wants to see a coordinated effort between the state game department and the Wyoming Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources to develop boat inspection stations.

Burns said the prospect of the mussels getting established in Wyoming is a nightmare.

"Not just to the lakes and rivers, but also because of their prodigious reproductive ability," he said. "It would be a nightmare for various towns and cities for their waterworks, because that's what they've done throughout the rest of the nation -- they clog up pipes and valves."

Idaho passed a law last year requiring all boaters to buy a sticker to help subsidize a statewide inspection program and other efforts to prevent introduction of quagga and zebra mussels.

Idaho authorities have said the state conducted more than 12,000 boat inspections at 18 stations around the state between July 4 and Labor Day, finding at least two boats with evidence of mussels on their hulls.

Steve Ferrell, director of the Wyoming Game & Fish Department, said the Wyoming Legislature will have to decide if the state can afford to fund the inspection program.

"This is an issue for basically anyone who uses water," Ferrell said.

Mike Stone, chief of fisheries for the game department, said the invasive mussels were largely an East Coast problem until a few years ago, when they were discovered in the lower Colorado River system.

The mussels tend to spread by clinging to boats that are put in different lakes. Stone said they can also survive in moving water.

"You can end up with situations that are counter to the fisheries that we cherish," Stone said.