

Testing under way for Fishing Lake overhaul



Cami Andrie writes information on a sample bottle while Levi Jensen cleans another sample bottle while the two take water samples from the Fishing Lake on Friday. Jensen, a civil engineer for the city, is in charge of taking samples from the lake for a study. - News-Record photo by Nathan Payne

By **STEVE MCMANAMEN**, News-Record Writer smcmanamen@gilletteNewsRecord.net

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Gillette's Fishing Lake at Dalbey Memorial Park is in need of a complete overhaul — a costly endeavor the city has known it would have to deal with long before the testing for pollutants began in October.

Levi Jensen, civil engineer for Gillette, has been testing in preparation to dredge the lake and rebuild the wetlands at the inlet next year. Jensen said the inlet, which is filled with cattails and sediment, is not functioning. That means that nutrients aren't being removed from the water. In turn, that's leaving high levels of phosphorus and other harmful substances in the main body of the lake where the fish are. "The flow is so channelized in there that the phosphorus and other nutrients don't get reduced as much as they could be through an improved wetland."

Wetland plants use phosphorus and other substances as nutrients to grow, but those same substances are harmful to fish and other aquatic life. Fishing Lake "doesn't meet the criteria for supporting clean water fish and aquatic life," Jensen said.

The city plans to reconstruct the entire area. It will be designed in a way that the city will be able to efficiently remove sediment before it flows into the lake, Jensen said. Sediment is a major problem for the lake, which has been dredged twice since 1973 and has been in need of a third dredging since 1993. That hasn't been done.

Fishing Lake collects all the oil, fertilizer, sediment and other pollutants washed into street drains and Donkey Creek from the South half of Gillette. "The report will tell us how much is going into the lake now," Jensen said. "Then they (DEQ) will give us a maximum load that can go into the lake and meet the criteria it needs to."

Jensen was not sure if the lake will have to be drained to dredge it or not. He said the project is being designed by a contracted engineering firm.

The entire project was going to be done through an engineering firm, but the city found that too expensive. So it scaled back and is doing some of the preliminary work on its own, Jensen said.

Jensen is monitoring a list of contaminants deemed too high by the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality.

Fishing Lake has been on the Wyoming Impaired Waterbodies list since 1996 and was shifted to a "high priority" in 1998. The city adopted a water quality improvement plan written by the Campbell County Conservation District in 2005.

Fishing Lake was never actually tested for contaminants until July 2008, after the DEQ was alerted by the Conservation District. The Conservation District found high levels of E. coli in Donkey Creek, the tributary to the lake. But the DEQ only tested the lake for fecal coliform and E. coli during those tests.

Jensen is testing for a list of substances that put the lake on the impaired list. He also is testing for flow rate and visibility. Once Jensen finishes his last set of tests in August, a report can be written to be sent to the state that, if accepted, will allow work to begin next spring. The report and findings of Jensen's tests won't be available until December, Jensen said.