

Inspection program part of state Legislature-mandated effort

Wyoming state parks part of fight against mussels

By JEFF GEARINO - Southwest Wyoming bureau | Posted: Thursday, April 8, 2010

GREEN RIVER -- The hunt for mussel-contaminated watercraft under a new Wyoming Game and Fish Department initiative will include Wyoming's state park lakes and reservoirs, state officials say.

Visitors to state park reservoirs and lakes -- including Glendo, Boysen and Keyhole -- can expect short delays while Game and Fish workers inspect boats, trailers and other watercraft for invasive aquatic species such as zebra and quagga mussels.

Wyoming Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources officials said the Division of State Parks, Historic Sites and Trails is partnering with Game and Fish this summer to conduct the mussel inspections.

The inspection program is part of a state Legislature-mandated effort to prevent the introduction of mussels into the state. Lawmakers allocated \$1.5 million in February to the Game and Fish Department to implement the preventative program.

"This will be something new that all of our visitors need to be aware of," said Milward Simpson, director of state parks. "At the end of the day, we all have a stake in this and we need to ensure that the unsurpassed recreation experiences we all enjoy and take for granted in Wyoming are there for use in the future, as well as for our kids and grandkids."

Quagga and zebra mussels can ruin fisheries, clog boat motors, foul watercraft hulls and equipment, and clog municipal and power plant water delivery systems.

The mussels have no natural enemies and once introduced into a lake or reservoir, the invaders usually spread quickly.

The mussels are not known to occur in Wyoming, but are present in neighboring states including Colorado, Utah and Nebraska.

Based on direction from lawmakers, the Game and Fish Commission implemented emergency regulations in March to address the mussel threat.

The Legislature gave the commission the authority to inspect boats and to prevent the launching of boats suspected of harboring invasive aquatic species.

Resident and nonresident boaters are also being asked to help fund the prevention effort.

Under the new program, all watercraft owners using Wyoming waters will be required to purchase and display an annual Aquatic Invasive Species decal from the department.

Decals will go on sale on the Game and Fish Web site April 15 and at licensed vendors May 17. The decals will not be available at state park fee booths.

Game and Fish officials said the department is in the process of hiring approximately 30 temporary workers for the summer to conduct boat inspections at state park reservoirs and at other various locations around the state.

State Parks and Cultural Resources public information manager Gary Schoene said Wednesday teams will inspect vessels at Glendo State Park and at other "priority" lakes and reservoirs in the state park system.

"There are five total teams and one will spend the majority of their time at Glendo," Schoene said. The other four teams will move from lake to lake.

"What we'll do is help (the Game and Fish) find an area where they can do their inspections ... a spot where we're not going to have water draining back into the lake after they've washed the boat," he said.

Inspection teams will be at Crystal and Granite lakes and the North Crow Reservoir within Curt Gowdy State Park; Guernsey, Seminoe, Keyhole, Boysen and Buffalo Bill reservoirs, and Hawk Springs Lake.

"They say 43 states have these mussels, so I guess we should feel pretty fortunate that we're not one of them right now," Schoene said. "The longer we can head this off, the more money we can save, because once they're (established), it's just a ton of money to get rid of them."

Game and Fish biologists say the best way to prevent the spread of mussel species between bodies of water is for boaters to drain all boat spaces that hold water, clean any and all equipment, and then allow it to dry before launching.

Contact southwest Wyoming bureau reporter Jeff Gearino at (307) 875-5359 or gearino@tribcsp.com