

Caring about the waters

By Jeanne Schram for the Aitkin County Aquatic Invasive Species Committee

The fight against the spread of aquatic invasive species is making headway. According to data from 2019, people using lakes in Aitkin County care about the quality of the waters.

Based on surveys at 18 lakes, fishermen and recreationalists took care of their equipment to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species to the tune of nearly 99% compliance.

Last year, the Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District conducted 11,145 inspections on the following lakes: Horseshoe, Farm Island, Minnewawa, Big Sandy, Cedar, Clear, Hammal, Hanging Kettle, Ripple, Round, Round near Garrison, Sugar, Wilkins, Lone, Long, Mille Lacs and Spirit. Inspections were done on boat lifts, docks, canoes, kayaks, fishing boats, Jon boats, personal watercraft pontoons, runabouts, sailboats and wakeboard boats.

“The lakes selected were mostly the larger and more popular lakes,” said Steve Hughes, district manager of the Aitkin County SWCD.

The equipment was checked for drain plugs in upon arrival; sending boaters away to drain water; plants, animals, water and mud; and zebra mussels.

Notably, there were no violations on Hammal Lake, Hanging Kettle Lake or Sugar Lake. Clear Lake and Round Lake had only one violation each.

The most violations were recorded at Farm Island Lake and Big Sandy, also where the highest number of inspections were performed, 2,521 and 2,294 respectively.

Farm Island had 20 violations, 16 for having drain plugs in and four for plants, animals, water or mud on equipment. At Big Sandy, 25 people had drain plugs in and seven had plants, animals or mud on equipment. No zebra mussels were found in inspections.

“I am not really surprised at the 99% compliance rate,” said Hughes. “We have had a slow improvement in compliance each year since we started in 2015. I think we can assume that the boaters are doing a good job in general, so all the lakes and rivers benefit.”

Hughes said changes in 2020 are increased inspections, “and we plan to work with more owners of docks and boat lifts,” he added.

Hughes presented the survey data to the Aitkin County Board Jan. 28.

The fight

In September 2015, the Minnesota Legislature allotted approximately \$10 million to distribute to counties that submitted an application and demonstrated a need for the prevention and identification of AIS in their lakes. Aitkin County receives \$270,000 annually based on the number of lakes with public accesses and the number of parking spaces at those accesses.

Aitkin County established the AIS Committee to run the program and oversee the budget. The county hires trained level one inspectors to check boats and trailers and

other water-related equipment for AIS and level two inspectors operate decontamination units.

“We began implementing our plan in the spring of 2015 and have concentrated on inspections and public education,” said Aitkin County Commissioner Mark Wedel, a member of the committee. “The program has expanded from the inspection of watercraft to now include both docks and boat lifts. We started the boat inspections at 15 county lakes and have expanded that to include 18 as well as several other lakes on a random basis.

“We have observed that compliance rates have increased from 96% to almost 99%,” Wedel continued. “We have taken a number of education methods to bring awareness to the seriousness of preventing contamination into area lakes and rivers. Future plans are to intensify existing efforts and, dependent on state funding, to increase the number of inspectors and education efforts.”

As always, stopping the spread of invasive species to other lakes and rivers, protects habitat for native species. Overall lake and river health is better without invasive species. Healthy lakes and rivers benefit fish, wildlife and people. Remember, “Clean, Drain, Dry and Dispose.”