

A chance to become part of a solution

Spring training will produce new detectives

By Jeanne Schram for the Aitkin County Aquatic Invasive Species Committee

Soon to arrive is a chance for you to become the first aquatic invasive species detector in Aitkin County.

For those who have an interest in aquatic ecology along with a desire to become a detective, this is your opportunity.

Dates will be announced soon for an AIS Detectors volunteer program.

AIS stands for aquatic invasive species which is a growing threat in Minnesota and elsewhere. More AIS detectors are needed to help stop the spread of these pests. Any motivated adult over 18 may become a detector. To become certified, participants must complete 16 hours of training, including online and in-person. While the online portion can be completed anytime, participants must attend one full-day workshop in a location to be announced. Once certified, detectors must complete annual volunteer service and eight hours of advanced or refresher training each year. There is no minimum number of volunteer hours required.

“The online course has six modules including species identification,” said Janet Smude, district technician with the Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District. “This can be done anytime that is convenient. Plan for six to eight hours to complete.”

The course covers invasive plants including Eurasian watermilfoil, hydrilla and starry stonewort; invasive invertebrates including spiny waterflea, rusty crayfish, zebra mussels and quagga mussels; and invasive fish including bighead carp, silver carp, round goby and ruffe. Detectors will learn to identify these invasive species as well as their native lookalikes and how to distinguish them.

The fee for the program is \$195, which provides unlimited access to the online course, a digital companion for the online trainings, the in-person workshop (including refreshments and lunch), a copy of the AIS identification field guide and networking opportunities. Individuals may pay their own fee or obtain a sponsorship from a lake association or conservation group. Some scholarships are available if the cost presents a hardship.

“The more we know about AIS and terrestrial invasives, the better we can be at helping to prevent this and/or slow the spread of both,” said Penny Stiles, an AIS detector in Crow Wing County.

Stiles, who grew up on a dairy farm in Connecticut, enjoys the outdoors and worked with Girl Scouts and dairy 4-H for many years. She spent her 32-year career teaching mathematics at Coon Rapids High School. Stiles enrolled in the Master Naturalist training in 2015, the same time she moved from St. Francis to a lake home in Emily. She became an AIS detector in 2018.

“Living on a lake, I wanted to learn more about both the invasive and native plants, fish, invertebrates, etc.,” Stiles said. “I also wanted the opportunity to do volunteer work.”

Most of the volunteer work Stiles is involved in centers around education.

Upon becoming an AIS detector, volunteer service hours may include completing new detection surveys, participating in Starry Trek, providing support to DNR detection and research projects, helping scientists in the field, reporting incidental AIS discoveries, staffing educational booths at fairs and events, helping develop informational brochures, speaking at meetings or events, building sampling equipment for AIS such as zebra mussel samplers or aquatic plant rakes, hand-pulling of AIS, helping with data entry from AIS projects, coordinating a volunteer event or stuffing envelopes with AIS information mailings.

For example, Stiles has staffed AIS information booths, worked at the Children’s Water Festival at the Minnesota state fairgrounds, worked with SWCD on a Starry Trek event that trains volunteers to sample waters for AIS, worked with the county AIS coordinator to help remove AIS and has spoken to lake associations and other groups about AIS issues. She also does volunteer work with the Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center, collecting items for research, such as studying the effects of spiny waterflea and zebra mussels on the walleye population in Mille Lacs Lake.

Training more AIS detectors will help Aitkin County become aware and ready to work toward the prevention and spread of AIS. Detectors are needed to help staff the many booths at fairs and events.

“Maybe there could be two or three Starry Trek sites in Aitkin County,” added Stiles. “Early detection of an AIS may make it possible to stop the spread to other areas. Having more volunteers would help assist with water-related projects sponsored by the Aitkin County SWCD.”

The Invasive Species Program began in 1991 with three goals: prevent the introduction of invasive species to Minnesota; prevent the spread of invasive species in Minnesota; and reduce the impacts caused by invasive species to the state’s ecology, society and economy.

The AIS Detector training was developed by the Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center and University of Minnesota Extension. For more information on the program and coming workshops, go to aisdetectors@umn.edu.

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.”