

Dry docks and drained bait buckets

Aitkin County is offering incentives to combat the spread of aquatic invasive species

By Jeanne Schram for the Aitkin County Aquatic Invasive Species Committee

Keeping waters clean is a high priority in Aitkin County.

Two programs illustrate that fact – a \$100 bonus for leaving docks and lifts on dry land for an extra nine days; and a bait bag obtainable at area bait shops.

Since July 2012, Minnesota law states that any boat lift, dock, swim raft, or associated equipment that has been removed from any water body may not be placed in another water body until a minimum of 21 days have passed.

Now people moving or selling those items can be rewarded \$100 just for leaving a dock or boat lift out just nine extra days for a total of 30 days on land (The dock or boat lift must have been in the water in the current open water season). The program runs each year from June 1 through Nov. 30.

This action will go a long way in preventing the spread of aquatic invasive species, or AIS.

Zebra mussels, for example, adhere to all hard surfaces, including the shells of native mussels, turtles, and crustaceans. In the Midwest they have destroyed boat engines, fouled beaches, and caused damage to boat ramps and docks. Zebra mussel fecal material may also contribute to taste and odor problems in drinking water sources. As of October 2019, The DNR has confirmed zebra mussels in 214 lakes and wetlands. It has listed 194 bodies of water as infested with zebra mussels because they are closely connected to a waterway where zebra mussels have been found.

Leaving water equipment on land for 21 days will effectively eliminate zebra mussels and other aquatic hitchhikers. The extra nine days is just for good measure and will net the participant \$100 to do so.

"We are excited that people are talking about and participating in the boatlift/dock incentive payment," said Steve Hughes, district manager for the Aitkin County Soil & Water Conservation District. "We are looking forward to working with many individuals who are selling or buying pre-owned lake equipment. Education is the key to protecting our lakes"

Know the law

You may not ...

- Transport watercraft without removing the drain plug.
- Arrive at a lake access with a drain plug in place.
- Transport aquatic plants, zebra mussels or other prohibited species on any roadway.
- Launch a watercraft with prohibited species attached.
- Transport water from Minnesota lakes or rivers.

- Release bait into the water.

Reward program

Here's how the program works: When someone elects to participate in the county reward program, the applicant fills out a form with the Aitkin County SWCD. SWCD staff will photograph the item and tag it with the date. Thirty days later, staff will return to photograph the same item and remove the tag when the owner signs a statement indicating the item was out at least 30 days. That program participant is given \$100.

Bait containers

The law requires all water to be drained from portable bait containers before leaving the water access or riparian property including bait containers that haven't been placed in lake or river water.

Under the law, anglers must drain the water from their minnow buckets before leaving any body of water. To take the minnows with them upon leaving a lake, anglers must replace the water in their minnow buckets, once on shore, with tap water or spring water. They cannot take that tap water or spring water with them in the boat while fishing, however. It must be kept in their vehicle on shore.

The purpose of the law is to prevent the accidental spread of invasive species in bait containers.

If anglers want to dispose of leftover minnows upon leaving a lake, they cannot be dumped into the lake. They must be thrown in a trash receptacle or taken home. They cannot be dumped on the ground at the boat access.

To help out, area bait shops are providing extra bags of clean water to people buying bait. Anglers may return empty bags to any participating bait shop and be eligible for a 50-cent reimbursement or \$1 off of one artificial bait purchase.

"The bait water program is gaining interest and acceptance," according to Hughes, "in particular, two resorts on Mille Lacs Lake have really done a great job promoting this lake protection concept."

For details on either of these programs, contact Steve Hughes at 218-927-7284.