

## A Model For Building an AIS Program From Scratch

The wake-up call came in Fall 2018 when the landowners whose properties surround Mound Lake in southern Todd County began pulling their docks for the winter.

“A few people found zebra mussels attached to dock posts,” said Mound Lake Association Board President Ron Ziegler. “The numbers weren’t great; one or two mussels on each of a dozen or so docks. But it was enough for us to know that we had to mobilize.”



*Dan Ziegler took the reins in establishing an AIS program for Mound Lake after zebra mussels were discovered.*

Up to that point, aquatic invasive species weren’t even on the association’s radar display, but that would change quickly. A handful of volunteers walked the lake’s shoreline and found evidence of zebra mussels in different areas—a sure sign of a lake-wide infestation, as opposed to a simple hotspot related to a public boat ramp.

“We knew then we were too late to do anything about zebra mussels,” said Ziegler, “but we realized the importance of plotting out a plan to avoid other invasive species.”

With the board's approval Ziegler dug around until he discovered that the county had its own AIS Committee, as part of the Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) and headed by District Manager Deja Anton. He wrangled an invitation to its next meeting, where he learned enough to make a recommendation to the lake association board. By then it was early 2019.

"I basically told them that we needed our own AIS committee," he said. "A small group of people who could focus on AIS issues—really sink their teeth in." What's more, he had a definite idea of who should lead the group.



*Revamping the watercraft inspection schedule to include high-traffic weekends was Dan Zeigler's No. 1 priority for the new Mound Lake AIS Program.*

"I know my brother Dan," he said. "He's got incredible organizational skills; and he's tenacious."

Dan Ziegler is a retired electrical engineer whose family has visited his grandparents' Mound Lake cabin since before he was born. Now he visits his own place from his home in Coon Rapids. And like his brother and their lake neighbors, he never gave a thought to invasive species until the zebra mussels showed up.



“When I agreed to take on the program for the lake, I had zero knowledge regarding invasive species,” he said. “I’d have to start from scratch.”

The goal, he explained, was to spend 2019 learning everything he could about AIS, then come up with a plan the board could implement in 2020. “I plugged myself into every place I could; the county, the DNR, other lake associations—everywhere. I also attended AIS workshops and seminars, including the big Minnesota AIS Research Center seminar held on the U of M campus each year.”



For months Ziegler absorbed everything he could regarding AIS—information on species identification and biology, the roles of various government offices and agencies in the battle against AIS, how to request funding assistance from the county, how to maximize the effectiveness of watercraft inspections at public access ramps, and more.

“I even reached out to the Big Birch Lake Association (8 miles to the southwest), who took me under their wing,” he said. “I met and talked with the people in charge of their AIS program on several occasions, and even got into the boat with their volunteer lake vegetation monitors. I

was impressed with the history of research and actions they had taken over the years.”

In the end he recommended a two-tier plan for 2020 to the association board. “The first priority was to establish a more effective watercraft inspection program.”

He’d researched old records and spoke to people with property adjacent to Mound Lake’s one and only public landing and determined that inspection efforts in the past were sporadic and ill-timed, with most hours logged on weekdays between 7 a.m. and 3 p.m.

“I put together a proposal for the county AIS Committee requesting more hours, and that they focus on the busier weekend days.”

The second priority was to complete a lake vegetation survey. “The last one was done 15 years ago, and if we were to create a team of volunteer monitors to track changes in plant growth, we first had to find out what’s in the lake now.”

Watercraft inspection teams have been on duty at the Mound Lake public access since the general fishing opener in May. And a lake survey is scheduled for mid-August when plant growth is at its peak. But Dan Ziegler isn’t finished yet. “I’m currently taking a class to learn about management techniques lake associations can use after an invasive species become established. Just to try to stay a step ahead in the game.”

“There’s been no push-back from our associations on the recommendations we’ve made because they trust Dan and believe in what he’s done,” said brother Ron. “They’ve even voted to increase association dues to support our AIS program.”

“Dan took the call, buckled in and did the research,” added SWCD Manager Deja Anton. “He’s not only done a fantastic job of advocating for Mound Lake, he’s also now on the AIS Committee I lead, and has an impact on the entire AIS program in Todd County.” Starting a lake AIS program from scratch isn’t rocket science, Ziegler admits. “It merely takes time and effort.”

*This information is produced and distributed by the Mississippi Headwaters Board in an effort to motivate everyone to protect our natural resources. A recreation based lifestyle is part of our MN Traditions and is only preserved when we protect our aquatic resources from invaders such as zebra mussels and Eurasian milfoil. To support Minnesota Traditions join us on social media here*

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