Watercraft inspector increases awareness about the spread of aquatic invasive species

It may not be his favorite job, but it is the most fulfilling, said Dave Smith, who lives in Ft. Ripley.

Smith is an aquatic invasive species (AIS) watercraft inspector for Crow Wing County. After leaving a 33-year career working for a plumbing company in the Twin Cities, he and his wife moved to property they owned for many years at Battle Lake in Ottertail County. When they moved again to Ft. Ripley, he landed the job of AIS watercraft inspector for the Land Services Department of Crow Wing County. Smith has worked as an AIS watercraft inspector for more than three years and he couldn't be happier.

AIS inspector, Dave Smith, left, recently on duty at White Sand Lake, points out an area of a boat checked for water where aquatic invasive species can hide. He inspects boats coming in and going out of lake accesses.

"I like the outdoors and especially fishing," said Smith, who can be found at a lake public access in Crow Wing County every weekend and most holidays May through October.

"Dave was a returning inspector when I accepted my new role with the county last May," said Nicole Erickson, environmental services specialist for the Crow Wing County Land Services Department. Crow Wing County announced in 2019 that the AIS watercraft inspection program is all in-house covering multiple lake accesses throughout Crow Wing County.

"I found Dave to be great with the public and very educated about teaching boaters the risks of AIS. We need more watercraft inspectors like him protecting our lakes."

Erickson, who is AIS coordinator of 55 watercraft inspectors, primarily works on AIS prevention and water planning. She said Crow Wing County receives about $450,000 in funds per year from the state of Minnesota to use toward the fight against AIS. The state awards about $10 million to counties each year which is allocated based on the number of public accesses and parking spots at those accesses. She said she hasn't yet found a county that has more inspectors than Crow Wing County does.

In its plan for 2020, Crow Wing County proposes to allocate 17,040 watercraft inspection hours on 42 public access landings across the county.

She said it's a hurdle to change the behavior of some lake users when it comes to cleaning, draining and drying. This year, Crow Wing County was awarded a $5,000 behavior change grant for AIS prevention by the Minnesota DNR. These grant funds will be use to target fishing tournaments and high-use lake accesses that are identified in the county. Crow Wing County watercraft inspectors will provide watercraft starter kits to 500 watercraft users at the accesses identified. The kits include bait bags, sponges, towels, AIS information, trailer sticker, equipment checklist, flashlights, and AIS bags (for all supplies) that will teach the public on how to keep the county waters clean and free from AIS.

"It is a big challenge to protect our waters and make sure they stay clean from AIS or pollution," she said. "We want to stop the spread of AIS to protect our lakes for future generations."

Crow Wing County had no zebra mussel infestations in 2019, "because of the AIS watercraft inspectors, the county's research, and boaters and fishermen doing the right thing at the lake," said Smith.

When boats or other water equipment comes to a lake where Smith is working, he inspects the boats, equipment and trailers for AIS that may be lurking or standing water where it shouldn't be, such as live wells, bilge pumps, ballast tanks or bait buckets. The equipment is checked going into a lake and coming out of a lake.

Smith wears a mask when making contact with the public in the era of a coronavirus pandemic.

"Water is our biggest problem," said Smith, who always carries clean water for those who may need it. Many who fish still don't realize they cannot take minnows or other bait with them on the water and use it at another lake.

"Most zebra mussels are carried through water," he noted. "One zebra mussel can lay up to one million eggs."

It's not just zebra mussels the inspectors are looking for. Equipment and water can carry other unwanted invasive critters and plants, such as spiny waterfleas, Eurasian milfoil, starry stonewort, and more.

If AIS watercraft inspectors find something not easily removed, the boat owner is given a one-way permit to take the equipment home or to a decontamination unit to wash their boat with high temperatures. There are four decontamination stations in Crow Wing County, where hot water is used to remove the offending AIS. Crow Wing County also purchased its first mobile decontamination unit to use at high-use lakes.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the opening of the county's decontamination stations," said Erickson, who added they are coming up with online training now.

Smith said it is heartwarming when the message gets through about AIS prevention and shared a couple success stories.

"Two couples came into Crow Wing Lake and checked their boat from top to bottom," Smith said. "They looked at bait buckets, live wells and everything. It was great to see how people prepare and protect our lakes.

"Two years ago, a father and son came to South Long Lake," he continued. "The son was very interested in what I was doing and asked a lot of questions about my job. Today the young man is an AIS watercraft inspector for Crow Wing County."

Why does Smith care about his job? "We need to protect our lakes for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren," he said. "I take this job very seriously."

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

Twitter: https://twitter.com/MNTraditions
FaceBook: https://www.facebook.com/MinnesotaTraditions/
Website: www.minnesotatraditions.com for more information