

Boater's Responses to Inspection Survey are Important

From the time the lake ice disappears in the spring until chill winds begin to blow in the fall, hundreds of thousands of state residents take to the water to fish, ski, board or cruise. It's one of our oldest Minnesota Traditions. And at one time or another many, if not all, of them have also participated in a more recent tradition—the launch ramp survey and boat inspection.



DNR officer talks with anglers at boat access

This summer alone some 700 trained inspectors, authorized by the Minnesota DNR Watercraft Inspection Program, have surveyed nearly a half million fishermen, pleasure boaters and personal watercraft operators at nearly 750 access ramps across the state. Among other things, inspectors typically note the license plate number of the tow vehicle for the survey, as well as ask the operator about the last body of water the boat's been on. how long it's been out of the water and the next lake the operator plans to visit.

So, what's the purpose for collecting all that data, and why should boaters strive to provide honest and thoughtful responses?

Established in 1992, with support from a number of Minnesota Lake Associations and angling groups, the Watercraft Inspection Program is a tool designed to help slow, or stop, the spread of aquatic invasive species (AIS) between water bodies. And the survey portion of the process simply helps DNR officials identify overall trends and patterns in lake usage and boat traffic, according to program coordinator Adam Doll.

“Information from any individual survey on its own isn't really useful,” he said, “but the collection of information from all the surveys can tell us a lot.”

Even license plate numbers have no value unless examined as a whole. “The DNR cannot access driver information or any other personal data from a plate number,” he explained. “We simply use them to determine patterns, such as, whether a body of water is getting a lot of repeat visits from boaters. Or, if a significant number of boaters tend to go from one particular lake to another.”

That type of information is powerful ammunition when AIS officials are trying to decide where their limited resources can best be used to stem the spread of invasive species.

“Having solid data is very important,” said Meeker County AIS Program Coordinator Ariana Richardson. “If I know that certain lakes in my county are being visited by boaters from counties where there are invasive species we don't have, I can better determine how to prioritize resources—whether a lake should have more boat inspections, more aquatic plant sampling or more shoreline observations. And sometimes it can mean that a certain body of water requires fewer resources.”

What shoots the biggest hole in the system, both AIS specialists agree, are boaters who don't take the survey seriously. Too many boaters tell inspectors they don't remember where they last launched their craft and have no idea where they're headed next, without taking even a few seconds to think about it.

“Certainly in some cases a person won’t recall where exactly they’d last had their boat in the water, and maybe can’t say where they’re headed next,” said Richardson, “but most of the time, if the operator takes a little time to consider, they may realize that, ‘Hey, I really believe my next stop will be Lake ...’”

The Minnesota DNR and its AIS program have no interest in the comings and goings of individual watercraft operators, but understanding as much as possible about overall boat traffic in the state goes a long way toward keeping the spread of AIS to a minimum.

Next time you meet a boat inspector at a launch ramp, take the time to respond to the survey as best you can.

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