

Spreading Enthusiasm, Not AIS

It didn't matter that he grew up in the Twin Cities, his heart was always at Little Birch Lake in southeastern Todd County, where he spent his summers.

Larry Bebus has been an aquatic invasive species (AIS) inspector since Todd County began its official fight against AIS just five years ago. He lived and worked in the Twin Cities until he and his wife were able to retire to the family cabin at Little Birch in 2012. "We tore down the cabin and built a year-round house," he said.



Larry Bebus inspects inside a boat at a public access in Todd County.

Bebus not only cared about his lake, but he wanted to keep all the lakes clean for generations to come. After he took the DNR training to become an AIS inspector, he worked for three years for the Big Birch Lake Association inspecting and scheduling inspectors at the Little and Big Birch accesses. For the last couple of years, Bebus has worked for companies having contracts with Todd County for inspection services. Currently employed by Waterguards LLC, he works closely with Deja Anton, district manager for the Todd County Soil and Water Conservation District.

“Larry is one of the most dedicated and qualified individuals for overall lake protection here in Todd County,” Anton said. It has taken some time, but fishermen are beginning to cooperate with inspections at boat accesses, according to Bebus. “They are beginning to understand that we aren’t trying to follow them around or count their fish,” said Bebus. “We just want to keep some things out of the lakes and from getting into other lakes.”



Larry Bebus has spent his life near water and lives on Little Birch Lake in Todd County.

Fighting AIS is an evolving campaign. Some of the non-native invaders have been in Minnesota for some time; others are relatively new on the scene. “People know about zebra mussels and milfoil and what they look like,” he noted, “but starry stonewort presents another problem. It can start out small and become more dense than milfoil. You can’t walk through it, swim through it or take a boat through it.”

Anton said Todd County has about 15 inspectors working at the busiest accesses at the busiest times. “We have three priority levels so even the less active lakes receive inspection to help remind lake users

that AIS can be found or transported to any water body if we are not careful,” she said.

While lake associations and lake improvement districts are vested members of the AIS team, Anton’s goal is to involve more resort owners. But she added that public education and local input and planning have already made Todd County’s AIS program successful.

One such public education event is this year’s “Starry Trek” planned for Aug. 15 at Lake Osakis. A statewide training event hosted by the Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center, University of Minnesota Extension and the Minnesota DNR, it is focused on searching for starry stonewort (and other invaders). If you are interested in participating in the Starry Trek program, visit www.StarryTrek.org. For more information on Todd County’s AIS program, email deja.anton@co.todd.mn.us.

“Without Larry’s inspection expertise and countless hours he gives unpaid,” said Anton, “I do not think the program would be where it is today. And what is most fun to watch is that his enthusiasm is spreading to others on various lakes throughout Todd County.”

The spread of enthusiasm, rather than AIS, is Bebus’s primary objective. “Ninety percent of people are on board,” he said. “We have to get everyone on board.”

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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