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KEEPING THE CRITTERS OUT: IDAHO'S VIGILANT WATERCRAFT INSPECTION PROGRAM

By Steve Stuebner

The Department of Agriculture's state-wide watercraft-inspection program is in its 10th year now, and the number of boats being inspected before entering Idaho and the number of contaminated boats is continuing to rise every year.

Keeping them out is the best strategy, say officials, because once they're in, they're virtually impossible to get rid of.

The program will surpass 600,000 boat inspections by the end of this summer recreation season. The number of boats contaminated with invasive quagga mussels and zebra mussels will likely exceed 250 boats to date, ISDA officials said.

During 2018 so far, Idaho's watercraft-inspection stations have conducted more than 93,710 inspections, 5,550 hot washes, and treated 45 contaminated boats, officials said.

So far, it appears that the state program has prevented any quagga and zebra

"The Columbia River Basin is still free of invasive mussels, we're happy to say," said Lloyd Knight, administrator of the Division of Plant Industries for ISDA. "There's still a lot of opportunity for prevention in the Pacific Northwest."

Six different conservation districts in Idaho contract with ISDA to operate watercraft-inspection stations around the state, including Bonner SWCD, Bruneau River SWCD, Franklin SWCD, Kootenai-Shoshone SWCD, Oneida SWCD and West Cassia SWCD.

ISDA officials say the districts are a real asset and a natural partner to operate the stations.

"The districts are really a perfect fit for us," Knight said. "They're already keyed

CLEAN DRAIN DRY

mussels from invading any of Idaho's lakes, reservoirs and rivers. And via more funding for the program, as provided by the Idaho Legislature in 2017, the state now has a total of 20 boat-check stations, some of them operating with extended hours and one station operating 24/7 during the summer season.

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into conservation work and protecting resources. To have people out there who can handle things day to day in the field, that's been great for us."

The districts enjoy the work, too, officials say.

"It's been a really great thing for our district," said Amanda Abajian, administrator for the Bonner Soil and Water Conservation District. "It's been a great way for us to stay connected to the community."

The 10 percent administrative fee that the Bonner SWCD receives for operating the boat-check stations also is helpful to cover expenses for other conservation projects, Abajian said. "That's been a real blessing for us here."



It doesn't take long for these invasive aquatic critters to foul a boat propeller - or worse!

Bonner SWCD operates three boat-check stations in the Idaho Panhandle – one in Clark Fork on the shores of Lake Pend Oreille, one at Samuels on U.S. 95 and one at Albeni Falls on U.S. Highway 2 on the way to Priest Lake or Lake Pend Oreille in Sandpoint.

"It's good for the community and the county to keep our lakes clean and free of invasive mussels," added Heather Stickler, administrator of the Kootenai-Shoshone SWCD.

Kootenai-Shoshone SWCD operates four stations in North Idaho, including two of the more popular stations at Huettner and Cedars, and then also Highway 53 and Rose Lake. The Huettner Station is the single most-busy check station statewide with more than 12,700 inspections so far

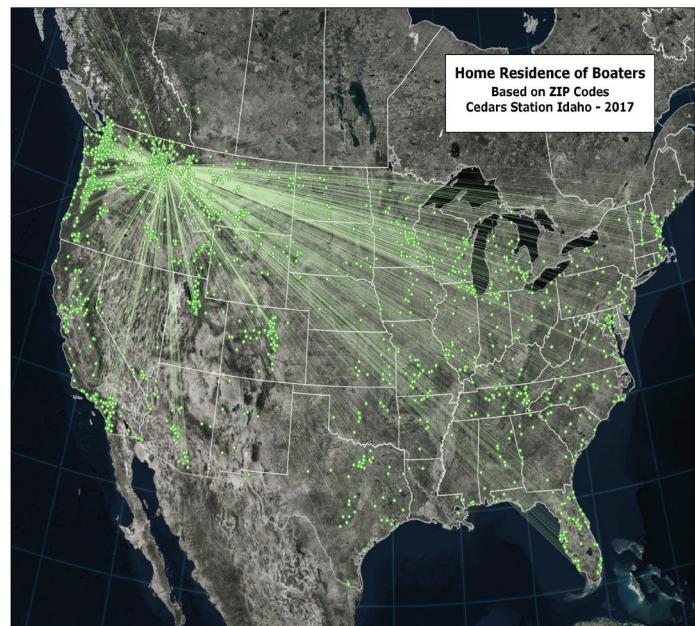
this year. The district employs 32 people to keep all of those stations manned from dawn to dusk.

"The big story is the threat posed by the invasive mussels," says Bruce Davis, manager of Kootenai-Shoshone SWCD boat-check program. "We're seeing more boats contaminated with mussels than ever before, and the number of contaminated boats has gone up every year."

Inspectors know what to look for. The boats considered high-risk to Idaho include:

- Boats that have been used in mussel-infested states in the last 30 days.
- Watercraft coming from another state (especially commercially hauled boats).
- Boats that show a lot of dirt, grime or slime below the waterline.
- Boats that have standing water on board.

Boats coming into Idaho from the Midwest, for example, could have been used in the Great Lakes, where they could have



Boat traffic nationwide.

picked up quagga or zebra mussels. The other major known contamination spots are Lake Powell in Utah, and Lake Mead in Nevada and Lake Havasu in Arizona.

Invasive mussels have occupied the Great Lakes region of the United States for 20 years. More than 1.5 trillion mussels exist in Lake Mead, 10 times the number that were recorded in 2007, according to an Associated Press report.

The mussels not only clog pipes and dam infrastructure, they also attach to boat dock systems, boat hulls, motors, intake systems, and bilge water. The mussels, native to Russia and the Ukraine, also are harmful to the aquatic ecosystem.



Boats - large and small - are regularly trucked into and through Idaho from all over the US.

The larvae of invasive mussels are microscopic and extremely difficult to detect. A thorough power spray wash at 140 degrees Fahrenheit will kill the larvae and wash out the invasive mussels at the Idaho boat check stations, officials said.

Another big threat are power boats designed for wakeboard surfing. Owners will place lots of water in the ballast tanks of those boats so they

drag deep in the backend of the boat, creating a nice big wave for the wakeboard surfers. Some boat owners leave that water in the ballast when transporting their boats.

Boat owners are advised to "Clean, Drain and Dry" their boats before leaving waters of origin, but people still don't necessarily know they're supposed to do that, officials said.

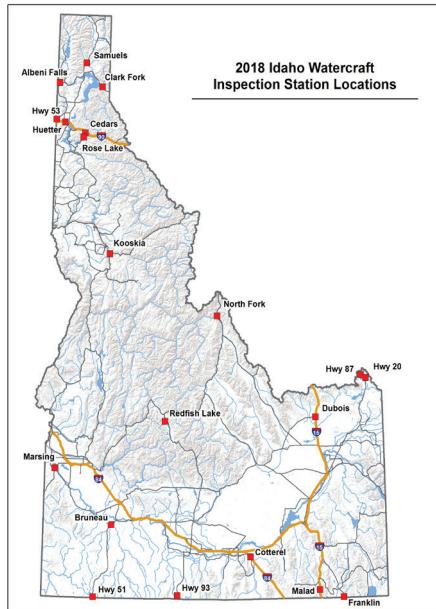
"The biggest challenge we have these days are those wakeboard boats," Knight said. "They go down to Lake Powell or Lake Mead to go wake-boarding, and they come back to Idaho and carry all of that water with them. There could be 200 gallons of contaminated water sitting there in the ballast. It's important for them to drain the boat at the point of origin."

Wakeboarders also could save money on gas if they remember to drain the ballast of heavy water, adds Abajian. "We see a lot of those boats come through with water in the ballast tanks," she said. "We try to provide a little education about draining the water at the point of origin and if they do that, their boat will be lighter and they'll save money on gas."

The Kootenai-Shoshone SWCD frequently sees large boats coming through I-90 check stations that are heading for the Pacific Coast and the Pacific Ocean. Some of those boats are yachts or military craft. "We get some huge boats from the Great Lakes coming out this way," Bruce Davis said. "We had one 60-foot military boat come through that was used for surveillance. Our people went on board to check everything out."

It can be quite time-consuming for state inspectors to treat large watercraft, particularly yachts, as one could imagine.

The Bonner SWCD had to clean a Burlington Northern barge that was being used to fix the long railroad bridge coming into Sandpoint. "That became kind of a big deal," Abajian said. "It had quagga mussels on board, but they were dead. The barge came to us from Illinois, where it got contaminated by Lake of the Ozarks, which is a known mussel-fouled lake. But fortunately, the barge had been out of



Idaho has 20 watercraft inspection stations around the state.

the water since January. That inspection was kind of a learning experience for the railroad and for us."

Boat owners are more friendly to inspectors than they once were, officials say, but often, they have no idea why their



Quagga mussels begin small, but grow into big trouble for waterways.

boats need to be checked. "The lack of education with the public is still a big challenge," says Abajian. "People don't know why they need to stop, but once they learn about quagga mussels and zebra mussels, they become advocates for the program."

Idaho inspectors rely on the honesty of boat owners to understand where they

have been, how long they were there, what water bodies they have been visiting and whether they have drained the bilge of their boat before leaving that water body.

The watercraft-inspection program received a big boost in funding from the 2017 Idaho Legislature with \$3.4 million in ongoing general fund revenues. The sticker fees paid by motorized and non-motorized boaters raises about \$1.2 million a year. Plus, ISDA landed a \$1 million federal grant from the Army Corps of Engineers.

"That influx in funding allowed us to have 1 station running 24 hours and the others 18 hours," Knight said. "It also allowed us to expand the number of stations to 20 statewide."

Additional funding will allow ISDA to build some infrastructure at some of the check stations to provide shelter for employees and places to store expensive boat-washing equipment and supplies. Some stations also will get lights.

"Our legislators really delivered," Knight said. "They wanted to protect the water and resources in our state."

State lawmakers who provided leadership roles included the co-chairs of the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee (JFAC), Rep. Maxine Bell and Sen. Shawn Keough, House Speaker Scott Bedke, Sen. Steve Bair of Blackfoot, Sen. Michelle Stennett, Sen. Mark Harris, Sen. Jim Rice, Rep. Judy Boyle and Rep. Terry Gestrin.

Idaho's adjoining states in the Pacific Northwest, Utah, Arizona and Nevada also are providing more support for watercraft inspections in their own states, and they're providing excellent cooperation on any questions that Idaho inspectors might have about out-of-state boats or water bodies.

"The states have been super to work with," Knight said. "The feds are coming along, but we still have to push them quite a bit."

Part of the issue with the federal government is for the entities that manage lakes or reservoirs fouled with invasive mussels to work with boats to clean, drain and dry

WATERCRAFT INSPECTION, cont. from Pg. 3



Invasive mussels attached to a boat on Lake Michigan

their boats at the point of origin. "We're working with the National Park Service, BLM, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to try to get those things corrected," he said. "It's getting better, but it's still not perfect."

"We visit with other states almost daily," Knight added. "Sometimes they give us a call to give a head's up that a fouled boat is coming our way."

The bottom line for all boaters is that they need to stop at Idaho's watercraft-inspection stations. There is no charge to have your boat washed, if that's needed. But if boat owners take it upon themselves to Clean, Dry and Drain their boats after finishing their trip, they should be fine.

"It's kind of a roller-coaster emotionally because people say it's inevitable that our waters will get contaminated, but we work really hard to keep that from happening," said Abajian.

For more information, go to <http://invasivespecies.idaho.gov/>

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.

COMMISSION UPDATE

With the end of another fiscal year, we're pleased to say that it was a good one.

District satisfaction with the Commission's services is at 88%, all 50 districts updated their 5-year plans, 6,100 hours of technical assistance were delivered by our field staff, we assisted 42 districts with projects, kept up with our TMDL and other program workload, AND served 407 landowners!

Conservation the Idaho Way published its 60th issue in June and we covered stories about funding for conservation projects, water quality, our partners: districts, NRCS, and many others, fire, high tech culverts, forest management after a fire, beavers, and more.

On August 30th, Commissioners approved a FY 2020 budget request that, if recommended for funding by the Governor and appropriated by the Legislature, would bring districts up to a full 2:1 state to local match! So doing would significantly improve districts' ability to accomplish on the ground conservation around the state.

Here are some details of the Commission's FY 2020 budget request:

BY Fund Category:

\$ 2,991,900	General Fund
\$ 321,200	Dedicated (RCRDP)
\$ 278,800	Federal funding
\$ 60,000	Other
\$ 3,651,500	Total

BY Object of Expenditure:

\$ 1,692,400	Personnel
\$ 399,300	Operating
\$ 26,600	Capital (includes replacement of 1 field vehicle with ~100k miles)
\$1,533,200	Trustee & Benefit
\$3,651,500	Total

The request also includes:

- An .25 additional FTF from FY 2019 to bring fiscal/hr manager from .75 to full time to provide agency/program support. This is critically important to manage our heavy administrative and reporting workload. We've been limping along for a number of years, but with the increased workload (contracts and grant), we need a full time position to accomplish assigned responsibilities and assist with additional planning and reporting.
- An additional \$280,000 for districts in the Trustee and Benefits fund.

Now that the budget has been submitted, the Governor and Legislature will review agency numbers and formulate their plans for the Commission and districts.

Stay tuned. Legislative session begins in January!

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