

Watercraft quagga mussel check points gear up for summer

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

The number of watercraft inspected at Northwest invasive-species check stations last year increased by 31% in Washington and 7% in Idaho.

The Oregon total also would have climbed had a key roadside station found enough employees to stay open longer each day, an official said.

More boat checks are credited with continued success in keeping Northwest waters free of quagga and zebra mussels, which clog and damage irrigation pipes and pumps in other states.

Longer operating hours and making sure watercraft owners don't bypass inspection stations are credited with keeping the mussel out of the region rivers and lakes.

Many stations are up and running — some are gearing up as employees are trained and others are open year-round — well ahead of the summer peak in demand.

Inspectors look for mussels, which can harm lakes and rivers as well as municipal and irrigation equipment. Crews also find other invasive species, including snails and plants.



ISDA
The Pacific Northwest remains free of quagga, zebra mussels. Traffic outlook is uncertain in light of concerns about COVID-19, larger economy.

"We continue to inspect more and more watercraft," said Nic Zurfluh, invasive species section manager at the Idaho State Department of Agriculture.

Idaho fields 20 roadside stations and six roving crews. Some stations stayed open longer each day in 2019, and police stopped more watercraft owners who initially drove by a station, he said.

"Every boat check station in Idaho had some sort of law enforcement support last year for boater compliance, basically get-

ting them to stop," Zurfluh said.

They inspected recreational watercraft and heavy equipment that works in rivers and lakes.

While it remains to be seen if this changes based on concerns about COVID-19 and the economy, inspection stations aren't focused solely on the total number of inspections, Zurfluh said.

"Our goal is not just to inspect more, but to inspect those with the highest risk," he said.

On Feb. 27, an inspectors along Interstate 15 in Malad, Idaho,

found a bilge pump with mussels in it. They were ultimately determined to be biologically non-viable and thus not a risk. The boat had come from Lake Havasu, Ariz., and was destined for Alberta, Canada.

Zurfluh said the border stations first to receive watercraft from known mussel-hosting areas, such as the Lower Colorado River system or the Great Lakes, are critical to keeping mussels out of Idaho and the rest of the Columbia Basin.

Oregon opened its inspection stations in 2010, a year after Idaho's program began. Inland stations remain critical to keeping mussels out of the larger region, said Rick Boatner, invasive species wildlife integrity supervisor at the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"We're still mussel-free in the Northwest, so stations are having a good impact there," he said. "All of the stations that have stations help us. Redundancy is important because the mussels are so small and they get missed."

Coordination among officials in the West and in western Canadian provinces has also advanced, Zurfluh said. They promptly share information about movement of watercraft that had mus-

sels or originated from high-risk areas.

"Prevention is more cost-effective than containment or eradication," he said.

In Washington, about one-third of watercraft inspected in 2019 came from known mussel-infested waters in other states, said Rachel Blomker of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Washington's two stations, on I-90 at the Idaho border and I-82 near the Oregon border, are open. Blomker said that combined, the stations last year inspected more than 32,000 watercraft, detecting 18 with mussels.

Oregon stations at Umatilla, Ontario, Lakeview, Klamath Falls, Ashland and Brookings in 2018 inspected 28,190 watercraft.

Boatner said the 2019 total was lower, but would have been around 30,000 if enough employees were available for the Umatilla station, which was open part-time. The Ontario and Ashland stations are open all year. Others open on May 1.

Idaho stations, Zurfluh said, inspected 110,486 watercraft in 2018 and 118,350 last year. Fifty boats had mussels in 2018 compared to 45 last year.

Water outlook still iffy in central Idaho basins

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Low snowpack in Idaho's central mountains has concerned hydrologists and irrigators since just after the start of the year.

Recent snowpack totals lag long-term averages by 30 percentage points or more.

Carl Pendleton, a farmer and rancher who chairs the Big Wood Canal Co. board, said persisting dry conditions could reduce total yields and pressure cattle on drier rangeland.

Hay growers in the area can get 3 to 5 cuttings in the typical year, he said. This year, they could end up with 2 or 3 cuttings if conditions stay dry.

Corn yields would be reduced if growers plant shorter-maturing varieties that have less mass at harvest, Pendleton said. Cattle on irrigated pasture should benefit to an extent from a grass crop that entered 2020 in good shape.

"Our snowpack right now is from big southern storms in December-January," he said. Snowpack then dropped quickly in relation to long-term averages, as February and early March stayed dry. Precipitation over the March 14-15 weekend helped a bit, bringing wet snow to mountains and rain to lower areas.

About one-third of Big Wood Canal Co.'s water supply comes from Magic Reservoir. The rest is from Milner-Gooding Canal on the Snake River.

The company's irrigation season could last to about Sept. 1, assuming a May 1 start and the current snowpack supplying about a month's worth of water,

Pendleton said March 18. That outlook reflects that the reservoir saw good carryover storage — water remaining following irrigation season — in each of the last three years.

Magic Reservoir can hold 191,500 acre-feet of water. If current conditions hold, it would drop to 4,500 acre-feet by the end of the season, he said. At that level, deliveries can no longer be made equitably and the fishery supported.

"We may not see the reservoir completely fill to the point that we need to draft," matching outflow releases to inflows, Pendleton said. "Our peak is normally in June. It has been a warmer year."

Pat Purdy of Picabo Livestock Co. grows malt barley, mustard seed and alfalfa hay. He said he's fortunate that his fields at highest risk of water shortage later this year already are in mustard and barley rather than alfalfa, which uses more water.

"We have been working in the last few years to move to a no-till production system and utilize a network of moisture sensors, all with the goal of making the system more resilient to climate stress," he said. "As the year unfolds, we may have to make tougher decisions. We may have to shut systems down depending on how events unfold."

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, which in a March 1 report said more precipitation would be needed to avoid water shortages, pegged snowpack as of March 18 at 70% of normal in the Big Wood and Big Lost river basins, and 68% in the Little Wood River Basin. At the same time, many southern Idaho basins had totals approaching 90%



BLM
Magic Reservoir on the Big Wood River in Idaho.

or 100%, or more.

Recent precipitation boosted totals by 11 percentage points in Little Wood, 8

percentage points in Big Lost and 3 in Big Wood compared to March 9.

January's active weather

patterns flowed from the west or northwest. Troy Lindquist, a senior hydrologist with the National Weather Service in

Boise, said that because of mountain ranges and topography, these types of storms typically are drier by the time they come east and south into Wood and Big Lost basins.

However, "in the past, they have had some very good March precipitation," he said. "So far this month, the storm track is a little more favorable."

Pendleton said most snowpack in the area's basins comes from "Pineapple Express" storms coming from the south.

"Our basin is relatively small," he said. "We can get a couple of big storms out of the south and they will fill our basin."

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