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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WHITEFISH'S COMPREHENSIVE AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES PLAN UPDATED TO BE CONSISTENT WITH MONTANA STATE PROTOCOLS

WHITEFISH, MT, July 26, 2017 – The Whitefish Lake Institute (WLI), City of Whitefish and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' aquatic invasive species (AIS) plan for Whitefish Lake has been updated.

Much like the statewide AIS plan, the comprehensive Whitefish Lake AIS plan includes prior program essentials such as early detection and monitoring, watercraft inspections, and education and outreach. In 2017 the program was enhanced in partnership with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to include a more comprehensive watercraft inspection and decontamination program to prevent the spread of invasive mussels to the area. Watercraft inspection hours and staffing were increased, an inspection station was added at Whitefish Lake State Park, and a decontamination station was set up.

Recent changes better align the Whitefish program with FWP protocols. To alleviate confusion, the new program calls for the following:

- All watercraft **MUST** be inspected prior to launching in Whitefish Lake
- Free inspections
- All high-risk watercraft **MUST** be decontaminated prior to launch in Whitefish Lake. This includes boats:
 - with ballast tanks or bags that have not been out of the water for 30 days,
 - with standing water that have not been out of the water for 30 days,
 - that have been in mussel infested waterways in the last 30 days,
 - that inspectors deem too dirty to inspect.
- Free decontaminations. Donations to support the Whitefish AIS program are accepted at the decontamination station.

- Watercraft presenting with an unbroken inspection or decontamination seal from the state of Montana, or other agencies or groups are subject only to a brief inspection interview at the inspection stations.
- Watercraft found to be mussel fouled will be turned over to FWP and not allowed to launch on Whitefish Lake.

“This update to the AIS plan for Whitefish Lake will extend the reach of our AIS prevention program, aligns the plan with state protocols and addresses local needs,” said Thomas Woolf, FWP AIS bureau chief. “We’re grateful for the partnership with WLI and the city of Whitefish.”

Montana’s fight against AIS is vigorous around the state, with particular focus on the Montana’s borders and the Continental Divide. Regulations new for 2017 require all watercraft coming into Montana AND crossing the Continental Divide into the Columbia River Basin be inspected prior to launching.

With summer more than half over, more than 23,000 watercraft have been inspected at FWP inspection stations. To date, nine boats with invasive mussels have been intercepted in Montana. The most recent one was found at the Browning inspection station July 16.

Whitefish Lake watercraft inspection stations are staffed by trained inspectors who, along with inspecting and decontaminating watercraft, help educate the public about the threat of AIS.

“We appreciate the patience and cooperation of lake visitors as we implement program updates,” noted Carla Belski, Community Services Coordinator for City of Whitefish Parks and Recreation. “Watercraft users at both City Beach and Whitefish State Park have been very supportive of the program to date.”

Full program details are available at: http://whitefishlake.org/AIS_Mgmt_Pgm.php.

History of Invasive Mussels in Montana

Aquatic invasive mussels were first documented in Montana in late 2016 on the east side of the Continental Divide. In November, Governor Bullock issued an executive order declaring a statewide natural resource emergency for Montana waterbodies. The executive order triggered the deployment of an Incident Command Team which worked to identify and contain existing invasive mussel populations and developed plans to prevent further introduction of invasive mussels to other waterbodies. On January 20, the governor disbanded the team and gave responsibility of the AIS effort to the Joint

Montana Mussel Response Team comprised of FWP and DNRC with support from the Montana Invasive Species Council (MISC). The state plan focuses on perimeter inspection stations augmented by stations along the Continental Divide.

This spring, WLI recommended an aggressive local plan to combat the invasive mussel threat. Like the state plan, this local plan will not be 100% effective in eliminating the threat, and the general public will need to be active participants in protecting their state waters.

“The robust local plan that developed from project partners working together means that Whitefish Lake has a very strong layer of protection against the invasive mussel threat,” commented Mike Koopal, executive director for the Whitefish Lake Institute.

History of City of Whitefish AIS Program

In 2013, the City of Whitefish began funding and implementing an annual AIS Management Plan as recommended by WLI. The purpose of the plan is to prevent the transfer of AIS to local waterbodies through various task items, including; early detection and monitoring, watercraft inspections, and education and outreach on AIS issues. Each year, the Whitefish AIS Management Program proposes specific task items to reduce the threat of AIS to the Whitefish area. The program is designed to be adaptive to emerging issues while maintaining a base level of protection from known AIS threats. Task items have changed slightly over the years based on new information and the ability to leverage other partnerships. However, certain task items have remained consistent such as a watercraft inspection station at City Beach, early detection monitoring for AIS, and control/eradication of Eurasian Watermilfoil (EWM) in Beaver Lake.

Why is This Important?

A invasive mussel colonization of Whitefish Lake has many plausible economic and environmental consequences to both individuals and the public at large. These include damage to: the City of Whitefish Public Water Supply or to the Water Treatment Plant, individual water intake systems, boats and boat motors, and docks. It includes reduced recreational opportunities leading to decreased recreational experience by visitors and locals which would impact local businesses. A fouled lake would also decrease property values and could potential impact the local tax base. Lastly, it can alter the ecology and water quality of Whitefish Lake due to the myriad negative feedback loops of an infestation such as the decline of native species, an increase in algal blooms, and eventual loss of water clarity. Because

Whitefish Lake is at the headwaters of the Columbia River Basin, a local infestation could—via downstream drift—affect all points downstream over time.

Who is Paying for This?

The plan is backed by a partnership of organizations, individuals, and granting organizations to spread the costs. Currently included in the partnership are: City of Whitefish; Department of Natural Resources & Conservation; the Flathead Conservation District; Flathead Chapter of Trout Unlimited; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; Montana State Parks; The Lodge at Whitefish Lake; Whitefish Community Foundation; Whitefish Marine & Powersports; and Joe & Cindy Gregory.

About Whitefish Lake Institute

Founded in 2005, the Whitefish Lake Institute is a 501 (3)(c) non-profit organization committed to acquiring scientific research, and to educating and engaging the local citizenry to protect the Whitefish area water resources of today, while providing a collective community vision for tomorrow.

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