Whitefish Lake INSTITUTE
501 (c)(3) Non-Profit Corporation

550 East 1st Street #103
Whitefish, MT 59937

Voice: 406.862.4327
Fax: 406.862.0686

www.whitefishlake.org
info@whitefishlake.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WHITEFISH LAKE INSTITUTE CRAFTS COMPREHENSIVE WHITEFISH AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES PLAN: Response to Increased Risk of Zebra Mussel Infestation Highlighted

WHITEFISH, MT, March 6, 2017 – The Whitefish Lake Institute (WLI) recommended FY18 plan and budget include prior program essentials such as early detection and monitoring, watercraft inspections, and education and outreach, but have been enhanced to include the implementation of a more comprehensive watercraft inspection and decontamination program to prevent the spread of zebra mussels to the area. The plan calls for an additional inspection station for Whitefish Lake State Park on State Park Road, increased watercraft inspection hours and staffing, gating, a decontamination station, and education and outreach to communicate the program to watercraft users.

Zebra 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 zebra mussel populations and developed plans to prevent further introduction of zebra 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 Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) with support from the Montana Invasive Species Advisory Council (MISAC). The state plan focuses on perimeter inspection stations augmented by stations along the Continental Divide.

WLI views the state response and plan positively but recognizes inherent challenges due to the sheer geographic scope, the fast-evolving science of early detection, and the possibility of intra-basin transfer of organisms. Additionally, most aspects of the state's plan will not be implemented until the start of FY18 (July 1st) leaving a large and critical timeframe of unprotected waterbodies in the Whitefish Lake Watershed. WLI therefore recommended an aggressive local plan to combat the zebra mussel threat. Like the state plan, this local plan will not be 100% effective in eliminating the threat. Other than

closing the lake to watercraft, this plan is the best option for keeping the lake safe. Once the state plan is fully implemented and the proposed local plan is in place, Whitefish Lake will have the most thorough level of prevention against zebra mussels for any waterbody in the state.

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 zebra 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; DNRC; the Flathead Conservation District; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; Montana State Parks; Whitefish Marine & Powersports; and Joe & Cindy Gregory. Other organizations are considering participation.

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.

Documents Available for Review:
FY18 City of Whitefish Management Plan

Media Contact:
Lori Curtis
Science & Education Director
lori@whitefishlake.org
Whitefish Lake Institute
550 E. 1st Street, #103, Whitefish, MT 59937
Phone: 406.862.4327 ▪ Fax: 406.862.0686

###