

BY SARAH SMITH

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Hubbard County lake activists organized early in the game and worked hard to build a model that other counties emulated and envied.

But like a loose thread that keeps popping up out of a weave, the organization founded to combat threats to pristine waters constantly asks if it did enough at the right time.

Such was the case Thursday night at the monthly Hubbard County Coalition of Lake Associations meeting. Praise for efforts in the war against Aquatic Invasive Species was commingled with doubts that it will be enough to keep pollutants at bay.

But efforts are showing progress. Hubbard County representatives comprise two of 15 members on the governor's newly formed statewide AIS advisory committee.

A summer inspection program run by Hubbard County Soil and Water Conservation District conducted 10,000 inspections of watercraft launching at various public access points on 21 lakes throughout the county.

But mainly it's become a boater education effort, so volunteers and paid staff made contacts with 10,000 anglers from outside the region, instructing them on the new laws prohibiting the transfer of waters that could contain harmful contamination.

Nearly 10 percent of those boaters had recently been in infested waters, surveyors determined.

And while the state DNR estimates 19 percent of boats owners statewide had not drained their livewells or pulled drainage plugs, Hubbard County's noncompliance rate was around 5 percent.

"We're influencing Hubbard County boaters more than the rest of the state,"

COLA member Jeff Bjorkman said.

At this point zebra mussels are the biggest threat and are popping up in counties outside Hubbard. At least 10 local lakes were monitored for veligers, the planktonic form of the harmful snails. Veligers attach to hard surfaces such as docks and boats, where they magnify exponentially.

A Wisconsin study indicated lakes in that state infected with water milfoil suffered a 13 percent reduction in property values due to the contamination.

Ken Grob, a longtime lake activist, estimated Hubbard County lakes, if hit with a zebra mussel infestation, could suffer a similar fate, although there are no local studies to back up those claims.

Many Hubbard County townships have large percentages of lake properties, so even a small shift in property values due to contamination could be a seismic decline in property values.

And that's what keeps COLA members going.

The economic impact of a lake infestation locally could be devastating, they believe.

About \$142,000 was raised for the inspection, a 50/50 mix of public and private funding.

Vigilance costs money, and a sustained funding source may be on the horizon, Grob told the representatives. A state general fund appropriation could alleviate funds lake associations, townships, cities and counties are contributing to what many believe is a statewide problem.

The DNR has been appropriated \$8 million for the AIS battle this year, a \$400,000 decrease from last year, Grob said.

Because Hubbard County lakes are situated along chains that drain into other lakes, one weak spot can contaminate the whole chain, COLA officials point out.

Overland infestations, due to education, have been reduced but it's the water in boats and motors that is the latest threat.

So the fight continues. COLA members are mapping out access points to county lakes that could be vulnerable spots and trying to recruit more lake associations and members. To date, president Dan Kittelson said, the organization has almost 2,100 paid members.