

Locals decry report

Preservationists say draft proposals by a state-organized task force don't go far enough.

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PITTSFIELD -- Recommendations proposed by a state-organized task force to prevent the spread of zebra mussels fall far short, according to members of the Lake Onota Preservation Association.

"We're faced with a scourge that's worse than anything we've ever faced before, and all we have to protect ourselves is a pea shooter," said Richard V. Laureyns, acting president of LOPA, of the report's recommendations. "We don't want to prevent people from using the lake, we just want to protect it."

Zebra mussels were discovered in Laurel Lake in July 2009, the first documented infestation of a body of water in Massachusetts. They have since been detected in Laurel Brook and the Housatonic River as far south as Stockbridge. Since then, 10 local water bodies have been tagged by the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation as being at high risk of infestation.

The Zebra Mussel Task Force was formed to come up with recommendations to reduce the spread of the zebra mussels to other lakes in western Massachusetts. The public can comment on the draft report at a hearing from 6 to 8 p.m., April 7, at Berkshire Community College.

The draft report lists key recommendations that include enhancing education, defining proper boat decontamination procedures, enhanced enforcement measures, and improvements in boat ramp monitoring.

The educational effort should include brochures and signage at boat ramps and mailers to those seeking permit renewals, the report states.

For enforcement, the report acknowledges that there are limited options under current statutes. It does recommend graduated enforcement provisions be proposed in future legislation.

According to Laureyns, the recommendations fail to identify a "single, state-management focal point" for zebra mussel issues, and fail to quarantine Laurel Lake through the use of DCR officials monitoring the boat ramp and installing a boat wash station.

He added that the report ignores LOPA's recommendations that out-of-state boats be closely scrutinized and cleaned, and that there is no funding available to enact special measures.

"Finally, failure by the state to mandate boat washing for all vessels will inevitably result in the inundation of zebra mussels in Berkshire waters," Laureyns said.

"We feel very strongly that Lake Onota and Burbank Park are an absolute jewel in the crown of Pittsfield, and it's really important that the city do everything possible to protect it," said Lewis Cuyler, a LOPA board member. "If Lake Onota and Pontoosuc Lake die, then Pittsfield gets the reputation as the city of dead lakes."

Cuyler said that the "last line of defense" at this point is the volunteer corps of monitors at each boat ramp to make sure boats are washed before they hit the water.

"But we just don't have the people to cover 2,100 hours through the season," Cuyler said.

Zebra mussels typically spread from one lake to another on recreational boats or equipment. Once they gain a foothold, zebra mussels can overtake an ecosystem and deplete nutrients in the water. They reproduce rapidly and can clog man-made structures like pipes, dams and docks. Their sharp edges are also hazardous to people walking or swimming with bare feet.

Many lakes in New York and northwestern Vermont have already been infested.