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Laurel Lake boat ramp staying shut

Officials form interim plan to battle zebra mussels, but boat launch will stay closed.

By Trevor Jones, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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Thursday, Aug. 20

LEE -- Two state environmental agencies on Wednesday announced an interim plan to prevent the spread of zebra mussels in the Berkshires this year, just days before they are expected to announce that the Laurel Lake boat ramp will remain closed through Oct. 15.

The Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Department of Fish and Game released a plan to combat the spread of the mussels through education, self-certification in the Hoosic and Housatonic watersheds, \$100 fines for noncompliance and long-term continuation of the current prohibitions of using contaminated vessels or waterways.

"We think it is a good working interim document of what immediate action we can take to prevent the further spread of zebra mussels," said DFG Commissioner Mary Griffin.

The DFG ordered the Laurel Lake boat ramp closed on July 8, shortly after zebra mussels -- an invasive species of mollusks that can wreak havoc on ecosystems -- were discovered in the lake. The emergency closure was scheduled for a 45-day period that ends on Friday. But state officials announced last week that they are seeking to keep the ramp closed essentially through the remainder of the boating season, which ends in mid-October. The period for public comment ended Wednesday, and a decision is expected soon.

"In order to keep them from getting into other lakes in the county, I think it's a great idea to keep it closed," said Mark Alimansky, the

_____ president of the Laurel Lake Preservation Association.

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While zebra mussels have been found in waterways in several surrounding states, Laurel Lake is the first state water body where their presence has been

confirmed.

Robert Race, the president of the Lake Onota Preservation Association, said he was in favor of the state coming out with a plan that everyone could follow, but remains uncertain of the effectiveness of self-certification if there aren't enough monitors on the lakes.

"Self-certification is good, it's better than nothing" said Race. "Is it 100 percent sure of keeping zebra mussels out? I would say no, nothing really is."

As of now, there are three DCR boat ramp monitors and a DFG employee assisting in monitoring Laurel Lake, Stockbridge Bowl, Onota Lake, Pontoosuc Lake, Richmond Pond, Cheshire Reservoir, Goose Pond, Windsor Pond and Lake Buel.

A privately funded, temporary boat-washing station is being set up at Stockbridge Bowl. George Shippey, who chairs the Stockbridge Board of Selectmen, noted that two state-funded boat washing stations have been set up at the recently reopened Quabbin Reservoir. He questioned the amount of funding that is available for local prevention measures.

"We have the known infestation out here," said Shippey. "The Quabbin is not infested and we're trying to keep Berkshire lakes from being infested and the state is doing nothing for us."

Griffin said the DCR set up the washing stations at Quabbin Reservoir specifically to keep filtration devices that are used to provide drinking water to millions of people cleared and working.

Griffin said she is aware of the concerns local towns and volunteer groups have regarding the long-term sustainability of zebra mussel monitoring, and said those policies would be reviewed before next year's boating season.



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