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HARMFUL ZEBRA MUSSELS IN MISSOURI RIVER COULD MEAN BAD NEWS FOR THE WEST

Zebra mussels could infest more western waters by clinging to recreational boats coming west for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial

(PORTLAND, OREGON) -- The discovery of juvenile zebra mussels below two Missouri River dams in South Dakota has western water officials worried about a possible infestation in the West by this harmful species. They're asking boaters visiting the West for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial to be extra vigilant about keeping their boats clean.

The zebra mussel is an exotic nuisance species native to the Caspian region of western Russia. It was most likely brought to the United States in the late 1980s in the ballast water of a foreign vessel. The zebra mussel damages ecosystems, native fish and shellfish, and has caused millions of dollars in damage to water intakes and pipes in 20 states in the East and the Midwest.

Until the discovery of juvenile zebra mussels in South Dakota last summer, the zebra mussel had not spread to western waters. The discovery is of particular concern because these mussels may have been transported into the Missouri River by recreational watercraft.

"This doesn't bode well for waterways west of South Dakota," said South Dakota Game, Fish Parks Aquatic Ecologist Jeff Shearer.

The zebra mussel moves to new locations by sticking to boat hulls, fittings, plants, and other surfaces. Recreational boaters who don't carefully clean their boats may unknowingly transport the zebra mussel from infested lakes and streams to previously uninfested waters. This species can live outside of the water for at least five days which is plenty of time to successfully hitchhike on a boat being trailered from Ohio to Montana, for example.

Western water officials are feeling particularly edgy because of the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial.

"Thousands of boaters from parts of the country where zebra mussels are common are heading to the West to recreate Lewis and Clark's expedition. Any one of them could unknowingly cause a zebra mussel infestation," said Fred Partridge of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. "Waterways in North Dakota, Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Oregon are all at risk."

Millions of dollars are at stake because of the level of damage zebra mussels can cause. Because the species is not native to the United States, it has few natural predators and reproduces very quickly. Its danger lies in its sheer numbers and its ability to adhere to any solid surface. In infested waters, zebra mussels:

- Clog power plant and public water intakes and pipes, costing taxpayers millions of dollars
- Damage boat engines
- Blanket entire shorelines with their sharp shells and foul smell
- Consume available food for native species and smother native mussels
- Threaten water-based recreational activities

“If zebra mussels invade the west, we could see significant damage to our hydropower system and sensitive native fish species,” said Tina Proctor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “What’s really frightening about zebra mussels is that currently, once they have taken hold in a waterway, they’re almost impossible to get rid of.”

“The presence of zebra mussels in the Missouri River has implications for a wide variety of groups. Resource managers, sportsmen, marina operators, irrigators, and municipalities could all be impacted by the presence of zebra mussels,” said Shearer.

Studies have shown that public education makes huge a difference in preventing and slowing the spread of exotic species. Therefore, officials have been trying to educate residents on how they can help prevent a zebra mussel infestation. Here are some things to know:

Description of zebra mussels:

- A zebra mussel looks like a small clam with a D-shaped shell. Usually it has alternating dark and light stripes.
- Can be up to two inches long, but ordinarily are about as big as your fingernail.
- Usually found attached to hard surfaces in clusters.
- Young zebra mussels look like black pepper and feel like sandpaper when attached to a boat surface

How to prevent zebra mussels from hitching a ride. Before leaving any waterbody:

- Inspect your boat and trailer. Remove all plants and animals.
- Drain your motor, live well, and bilge while on land.
- Empty your bait bucket on land. Never release live bait into a water body or transport aquatic animals from one water body to another.
- Rinse your boat, trailer, and equipment. High pressure hot water is best, but a garden hose will work.
- Air dry your boat and equipment for as long as possible. At least five days is optimal.

What to do if you see a boat that appears to be carrying zebra mussels west of the Mississippi:

- Call 1-800-437-2744. This is the Bonneville Power Administration and Bureau of Reclamation crime witness number, which also takes reports of zebra mussel sightings.
- If there is a park ranger, fish and game representative, or some other official nearby, let them know.
- Call your local state fish and wildlife agency and report the sighting. Oftentimes, an agency representative will come to the scene.
- Talk to the boat owner and encourage him/her to remove the zebra mussels before placing the boat in any water body.

“We can’t stop and inspect every boat coming west,” said Stephen Phillips of the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, “so we need anyone who might come in contact with boats to be our eyes and ears. Fishermen, people at gas stations, and people using lakes, marinas, and beaches can all help by being lookouts.”

For more information on zebra mussels, visit www.protectyourwaters.net or www.100thmeridian.org.

