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Contact: Stephen Phillips
503-595-3100
Bill Zook
360-252-2700

WESTERN WATER OFFICIALS ASK RESIDENTS TO WATCH OUT FOR AN UNWELCOME HITCHHIKER DURING LEWIS AND CLARK BICENTENNIAL

The zebra mussel, a harmful water species, may migrate west on tourists' boats

(PORTLAND, OREGON) – Western water officials are worried about an unintended – but potentially harmful – side effect of the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial. It could bring zebra mussels which could result in severe environmental and economic damage to western waters. So far, this dangerous exotic species has not spread to the western states.

“Zebra mussels are incredibly harmful. We want to keep them out of the west,” said Randy Fisher, Executive Director of the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission.

The zebra mussel is an exotic nuisance species native to the Caspian region of western Russia. It was first sighted in the United States in 1988, most likely brought here in the ballast water of a foreign vessel. It has few natural predators in the U.S. and reproduces very quickly. Since its arrival in the U.S., the zebra mussel has infested lakes and rivers in 22 states. The 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



Courtesy of USFWS

“If zebra mussels invade the Columbia River Basin, we could see significant damage to our hydropower system and sensitive native fish species,” said Jim Irish of the Bonneville Power Administration. “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.”

So far, zebra mussels have not infested Northwest waters, but that could change this year as a result of the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial. Thousands of recreational boaters are expected to retrace the explorers’ journey west this year, much of which was done on water. If some of those boaters unintentionally bring zebra mussels

with them, uninfested lakes and rivers in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, North Dakota, Washington, and other western states could see a zebra mussel outbreak.

“Zebra mussels most often move from one waterway to another by hitching a ride on recreational boats and trailers,” said Stephen Phillips, Aquatic Nuisance Species Coordinator for the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission. “They stick to any solid object, such as a boat hull or a motor. They also adhere to aquatic plants, which may be attached to a boat or trailer. This species can live outside of the water for at least five days -- plenty of time to successfully hitchhike on a boat being trailered from the Midwest to the Northwest.”

Most boaters in the eastern United States have been educated about zebra mussels and have learned to take proper precautions to prevent their spreading, such as properly cleaning and draining their boats after every use. But, not everyone has gotten the message.

Phillips, along with officials from state governments in the west, the Bonneville Power Administration, Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and numerous other agencies and industry representatives, are part of the 100th Meridian Initiative. The group has been working to keep zebra mussels from spreading west of the 100th Meridian, the north-south line which runs down the middle of the U.S. They are worried that with such a large number of boaters expected to travel west for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial next year, the chances for a western zebra mussel infestation are significantly higher than in other years.

Officials in the west have been trying to educate western residents on how they can help prevent a zebra mussel infestation. Here are some things to know:

Description

- A zebra mussel looks like a small clam with a D-shaped shell. Usually it has alternating dark and light stripes.
- They can be up to two inches long, but ordinarily are about as big as your fingernail.
- They usually are 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 water body --

- 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

- Trailered boats from states east of the Mississippi River are more likely to carry zebra mussels
- 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 Phillips, “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.

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