

## **Boating Fee for Invasive Species Prevention a Worthy Program**

By Randy Henry, Operations Policy Analyst for the Oregon State Marine Board

Shortly after the end of the 2009 legislative session, several editorials and news stories were published focusing on new fees and the disruption they would cause in the lives of Oregonians. Certainly one of those new fees will affect people who use motorized and non-motorized boats to recreate on Oregon's waters.

Briefly, the new fee will fund Oregon's most aggressive effort yet to prevent the spread of damaging invasive plants and animals in waterbodies across Oregon. Some of the most serious threats lie just outside our borders, like zebra and quagga mussels, and others like Eurasian watermilfoil and New Zealand mud snails are already here, choking fish habitat and clogging waterways.

The Oregon State Marine Board is responsible for implementing the fees as set in House Bill 2220, which creates and funds the Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Program in partnership with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Immediately after passage, questions began rolling in: how much will I have to pay, and how will the funds be used?

House Bill 2220 calls for all boats registered in Oregon - boats with motors, and sailboats 12 feet and longer - to pay a \$5 surcharge on their boat registration. When you renew or register your boat beginning in 2010 you will see a \$5 increase in your registration fee. Your registration decal is proof that you paid the permit fee. The permit is not transferable to other watercraft. If your power boat is registered outside of Oregon, you'll pay a \$20 non-resident permit fee to operate on Oregon waters.

People who own or operate paddle boats 10 feet or longer will purchase a \$5 permit each year. The legislation clearly states that once the operator of a manually powered boat buys a permit, the operator can use the permit with other manually powered boats. Because these watercraft are not registered, a separate permit delivery system is now in development. Starting in December, this permit will be available through any of 500 ODFW license agents, 100 or so Marine Board registration agents, over the Internet and at other select locations where availability is limited. There are other programmatic details available on our website at [www.boatoregon.com](http://www.boatoregon.com).

So why this fee, and why now? The driving force behind the legislation was the introduction of small exotic freshwater mussels into Lake Meade and the Colorado River basin in 2007. Zebra and quagga mussels are incredibly destructive, nearly impossible to control, and pose hundreds of millions of dollars in risk to Oregon's hydroelectric power generators, irrigators, municipal water supplies, fishing and fisheries restoration efforts, general water-related recreation, not to mention drastic changes to the ecology of the waterways once they're populated. The Great Lakes have experienced this since introduction in the mid-1980s, and Lake Meade and other Colorado River reservoirs, dams, water delivery systems and municipalities are experiencing it now. The impact cannot be overstated.

Each month, another infested boat heads to or through Oregon. Other state constitutions allow border inspections, but without a constitutional amendment, we simply can't do mandatory border inspections in Oregon. Our current prevention efforts have, for the last decade, been based on ad-hoc partnerships built on shoestring budgets, good will and the hard work of state, federal and local governments, private organizations and others to address the issue. Based on this effort, many Oregonians understood the threat facing our state and urged our Legislature to take definitive action.

So, in the final days of the session, when it was apparent that a funding source would not be found to implement a larger prevention program, the legislature directed the Marine Board and ODFW to implement a funding effort and prevention program similar to what the State of Idaho had done a couple months earlier, and what Utah and other states were already doing. The funds will be used to establish five boat inspection teams across the state, purchase mobile decontamination equipment, provide training and direction for state and county law enforcement, increase outreach and education dollars for signage and other materials, and focus efforts in areas of greatest concern. These teams will work fishing tournaments, heavily used boat ramps, community events, border crossings in key areas, currently infested sites, and they can be mobilized as needed should a serious infestation be discovered. They will also take the message to boat and sport shows, county fairs and other local venues.

While border inspection stations would probably be more effective, they are also much more expensive. And while a fair number of boaters aren't thrilled with the new fee, the program is by far the most significant effort this state has mustered to prevent or control aquatic invasive species infestations.

In the end, the primary goal of this effort is to provide the tools and knowledge, consistent with other states, to have people clean, drain and dry their boats before each use. While zebra and quagga mussels are the driving force behind the legislation, an educated fleet of recreational boat owners will go far in preventing the further spread of damaging invasive plants and animals already present in Oregon lakes. It will also help prevent another "Diamond Lake," where a prime fishery and its economic benefit was lost to an invasive fish for an entire decade, ending finally in 2006 with a complex \$6 million restoration effort.

In short, the cost of prevention is far cheaper than the cost of infestation. The money invested now - even if we're not 100 percent effective - will save millions later. This is knowledge gained from other states that have been immersed in this issue for decades. It would be a serious, short-sighted and expensive mistake to roll back the clock on Oregon's prevention efforts.

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