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Oregon Prepares for Aquatic Invaders with Rapid Response Exercise

During the week of May 20, a group of 15 participants converged on the Snake River in Hells Canyon for a planning exercise in the event the Columbia River Basin tests positive for quagga or zebra mussels.

The group practiced activating a mock command center and conducted a scenario-based, on-water drill. From this exercise, the group determined what actions, and their priority, in the event quagga or zebra mussels are detected in the Columbia or Snake Rivers. Other objectives of the exercise were to identify communication gaps and other pitfalls to remedy before actual monitoring samples confirm a waterway contamination. Representatives from the Oregon State Marine Board, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Idaho Department of Agriculture, US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, Oregon Department of Agriculture, Idaho Power and the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, participated in the exercise.



Hells Canyon Park, owned by Idaho Power

“If quagga or zebra mussels get a foothold in the Columbia River Basin, hydropower facilities, irrigation, agriculture and other industries that depend on water will be hit hard; not to mention the impact this could have on salmon and steelhead populations and all of the work that’s been done to improve fish habitat,” says Glenn Dolphin, Aquatic Invasive Species Coordinator for the Oregon State Marine Board. “Oregon needs to practice a rapid response plan and act fast. The question isn’t “if” the mussels contaminate the basin, but “when.” We need to have everything dialed into the point where the group is a well-tuned machine with leadership and procedures in place, and everyone knows what role they play.”

Officials in Idaho have taken many preparatory steps in the event these invasive mussels wind up in their waterways and Oregon is looking at mirroring their state’s response efforts. Idaho assembled a playbook for rapid response that was used as a template for the exercise.

“Rapid response exercises are extremely important, says Rick Boatner, Invasive Species, Wildlife Integrity Supervisor for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. “If you miss your window of opportunity for whatever reason, the mussels will take over an entire ecosystem and now you are dealing with containment and control, which is far more expensive and drastically increases the chance that the mussel will expand into more areas around the state.”

Mandatory boat inspection stations in Oregon are the first line of defense, but most are only open seasonally during daytime hours with Ashland and Ontario stations open year-round. Recreational boaters can help protect the waters where they recreate with three simple steps: ***Clean, Drain and Dry*** their boat after every use.

The Marine Board and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife co-manage Oregon’s Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Program. Non-motorized boats 10 feet long and longer are required to purchase and carry an aquatic invasive species permit. Motorized boaters are assessed a fee on their motorboat registration to help fund the program. These fees pay for aquatic invasive species inspection stations, decontamination equipment, staffing, law enforcement, and outreach materials.

For more information about aquatic invasive species or to purchase a permit, visit <https://www.oregon.gov/osmb/boater-info/Pages/Aquatic-Invasive-Species-Program.aspx> and <https://myodfw.com/articles/buying-aquatic-invasive-species-prevention-permit>.

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*The Marine Board is funded by registration, title fees and marine fuel taxes paid by motorized boaters. **No lottery, general fund tax dollars or local facility parking fees** are used to support the agency or its programs. Boater-paid fees go back to boaters in the form of boating safety services (on-the-water enforcement, training, and equipment), education/outreach materials, and boating access facility grants (boat ramps, docks, parking, restrooms, and construction and maintenance). The Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Permit program is dedicated funding to pay for border inspection stations, decontamination equipment, inspectors, and signage/outreach materials. The Mandatory Education Program is self-supporting and revenue helps pay for education materials and boater education cards. For more information about the Marine Board and its programs, visit www.boatoregon.com.*