

Naticook Lake Milfoil Progress Report

September 13, 2012

Merrimack--Two dozen members of the Naticook Lake Association gathered at YMCA Camp Sargent Thursday evening (9/13) to meet with Amy Smagula of the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services (DES). Also attending were State Representatives Chris Christensen and Kathy Stroud, (both r-Merrimack).

Ms. Smagula is a biologist who focuses on prevention, control, and eradication of invasive species in NH's waters. Her focus was on the recently reported infestation of variable milfoil in Naticook Lake, and the steps taken to remove it. Representative Christensen, clerk of the Resources, Recreation and Development Committee, also chairs the Exotic Aquatic Weeds and Species Committee which deals with milfoil. Rep. Stroud is a member of the Municipal and County Government Committee.

Milfoil was first reported in Naticook Lake in July, although Ms. Smagula estimated from plant size and locations, that it had been in the lake for 3-4 years. The growth is heaviest near the boat launch. This is typical because milfoil is often transported from lake to lake on boat trailers. From there it has spread along the shore, and there is some growth near the dam. The plant spreads rapidly when a piece breaks off and is carried by a trailer, boat, or wind and waves to another part of a water body, sinks, and establishes a new root system. Eventually, it can fully cover an area as it canopies on the surface and crowds out native plants and other aquatic life. The thickest growth prevents swimming, boating and other water based activities like fishing.

Historically, milfoil was first a problem in Lake Winnepesaukee in the mid 1960's. Since then it has spread to over 70 lakes and ponds in our state. Early attempts to remove milfoil were based on cutting and harvesting, but this turned out to be counterproductive, with infestations spreading via the broken stems that floated away, and re-rooted. Later, herbicides were used every few years. This was temporarily successful in containing growth and spread, but re-growth was part of the cycle when left alone for a season or more.

Impacted water bodies now are approached with a master plan developed by DES that focuses on rapid response when a new infestation is

discovered. In the case of Naticook Lake, Ms. Smagula first identified the problem based on pictures and plant samples sent in by a member of the association. Within a few days she was in Merrimack and surveyed the lake to determine size and locale of the milfoil. (A map showing the details of this survey is available on the internet at www.ChristensenNH.com under "Regional Issues". Shortly after the survey was completed, a dive team was on site to start a removal process, bringing the plants up including the complete root system. A pontoon boat with air and water suction pumps was also brought in. This process is known as "Diver Assisted Suction Harvesting" (DASH). It was stressed that the divers must be specially trained and certified, not only as divers, but for milfoil removal. Those who attempt diving and removal without such certification are actually doing so illegally, and can cause more spread when they inadvertently fail to get a complete root system, or break off pieces that float away. The DASH program uses another team member in a canoe or kayak to scoop up breakage and collect it for later disposal. She expects the dive team will operate in Naticook Lake for a few more days this fall. Then there will be a re-evaluation and over the next several weeks a master plan for the lake will be developed, including some cost estimates for follow up control.

Many lakes have trained "weed watchers" who patrol a grid and detect new growth and monitor the progress of control and eradication. Several people signed up for this training which will be completed this fall. The class takes about an hour.

Prevention is another aspect of the milfoil program. Many boat launch sites around the state are staffed in the summer with "Lake Hosts". These folks are based at public launch ramps and they do some education, and inspect boats and trailers for milfoil pieces as they come in and out of the water. Run by the NH Lakes Association, the Lake Host program is heavy on manpower, but has been credited with several "catches" each season. Unfortunately, many lakes are not covered by this program. DES has provided signs for the launch area at Naticook Lake alerting boaters that milfoil is present, and that they should carefully inspect their boat and trailer. We do not want milfoil from Merrimack to be spread elsewhere. A plant fragment can re-grow even if it has been out of the water for several weeks. Seeds can grow into plants even if dormant for several years.

Representative Christensen spoke about how these programs are funded both with state funds and privately raised funds. In most areas, towns have also added funding, as has been done in Merrimack for work at Horseshoe

Pond. Currently, state monies come from a \$7.50 surcharge on boat registrations. He compared this to Maine, where all boats, not just power boats, must display a milfoil sticker. In Maine, such a sticker costs \$20.00. While he was hesitant to think that a \$20.00 fee would get through the NH Legislature at this time, he thought it might be possible to get a similar sticker program started. This would broaden the base to include canoes, kayaks and rowboats, as well as boaters from out of state who currently pay no fee. Just raising the fee on existing registrations is not popular because it is seen as putting the burden on just one group unfairly. "New Hampshire has long taken pride in our clean water and beautiful lakes. We stress it in our marketing to businesses and tourists and residents certainly benefit," he stated. Continuing, he noted that "In some instances, landowners have sought abatements or tax assessment reductions because of heavy milfoil growth that prevents their full use of their property, but which they cannot individually do anything about. This is where individuals, associations, towns and DES must join forces. The negative financial effect of doing too little could be devastating."

A few years ago, approximately 104,000 boats were registered in New Hampshire, all paying the \$7.50 surcharge. But that surcharge had only been in effect a short time when boat registrations started falling off, now down to about 90,000. Funds raised this way are used in a matching grant program. Under DES master plans, towns and groups looking for funding assistance apply in the fall and get approval early enough that they can work part of the funding through town meeting in March.

Work will continue into the fall with more diving, development of a master plan, training of local volunteers and other action to be determined at the Naticook Lake Association annual meeting next month.