

All boats will face DNR roadside checks

DOUG SMITH, Star Tribune

For the first time, Minnesota's 800,000 boaters will encounter mandatory roadside check stations this spring at which their vessels will be inspected for aquatic invasive species -- part of a statewide crackdown to slow the spread of exotic critters and plants.

Motorists towing boats will be told to pull into check stations staffed by Department of Natural Resources conservation officers and boat inspectors, the agency announced Friday. Boats that fail inspections will be sent to a nearby decontamination area to be high-pressure-washed with hot water.

But their owners won't get off clean. Those caught violating state laws against transporting zebra mussels, Eurasian water milfoil and other invaders can expect citations and fines instead of warnings, as in previous years. "We're done educating," said Jim Konrad, DNR enforcement chief. "If you get caught violating invasive species laws, you should expect a citation." Fines are \$50 and up.

Also in 2012, boaters will be required to apply free decals to their boats reminding them to comply with the law, including draining all water from boats and bait containers and removing vegetation or invasive species from boats and trailers.

Boaters also must transport their crafts with the drain plugs removed.

The DNR will begin distributing the stickers next month at the Minneapolis Boat Show. Warnings 'come to an end'

After several years of publicity, signs at boat launches and warnings from conservation officers, state boaters and anglers should be aware of laws prohibiting the transportation and spread of invasive species, Konrad said. But too many either haven't learned or haven't bothered to comply, he said.

Last season, 18 percent of boaters checked by conservation officers were in violation.

And officers issued 840 citations or warnings -- triple the number issued in 2010.

"That's unacceptable," Konrad said. "The warnings are going to come to an end."

Roadside inspections are a concept the DNR employed years ago to check for game and fish violations.

The agency discontinued those random stops because of legal concerns, but the Legislature last year gave the agency authority to operate invasive species check stations. Konrad said he's not sure how many will be run this year, but he said they won't occur on busy highways, where the stops could cause traffic safety issues.

Signs will direct vehicles with boats to pull in, but other vehicles won't be stopped, Konrad said.

The DNR also is buying 20 decontamination units, in addition to three it got last year, that will be operated near zebra mussel-infested waters, high-use destination lakes and at the enforcement checkpoints.

The units cost about \$15,000 each and use 160-degree high-pressure water to remove and kill invasive species attached to boats or marine equipment. The sprayed water is captured in a reclamation mat so it doesn't wash into lakes and streams, then is filtered and re-used.

The DNR also will hire 150 watercraft inspectors who will be deployed statewide.

Three invasive-species specialists also will be hired to work with lake associations, local governments and individuals.

Additionally, the DNR plans to demonstrate inspections and decontamination of boats at major fishing tournaments on zebra mussel-infested waters. The agency also is producing a video documentary on aquatic invasive species that will be distributed to news media, lakeshore organizations and others.

About 30 state lakes and five major rivers are infested with zebra mussels, which can alter ecosystems, affect fish and fishing, kill native mussels and clog pipes. Their sharp shells can cut swimmers.

Invasive species "will be the No. 1 issue for us, probably for the next several decades," DNR Commissioner Tom Landwehr told about 300 people gathered Friday at the agency's annual "roundtable" meetings in St. Paul.

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