

Boaters, water users reminded: Don't move a mussel

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LAKE COUNTY — As California's water recreation season begins, a state multi-agency task force reminds boaters to do their part to help thwart invasive quagga and zebra mussels.

Boats are the primary transporters of the aquatic species and recreationalists should take special care to properly clean, drain and dry vessels.

"Invasive mussels pose a serious threat to our water systems and recreational facilities," said California Secretary for Resources Mike Chrisman. "Over the Memorial Day holiday and throughout this boating season we ask for the assistance of water users to prevent the spread of quagga and zebra mussels in California."

The task force — comprised of California's Department of Fish and Game, Department of Water Resources, Department of Parks and Recreation and Department of Boating and Waterways — urges boaters to take action to protect the state's many water bodies from quagga and zebra mussel infestation.

Invasive aquatic mussels are primarily transported by watercrafts and boaters should follow these steps to inhibit their spread:

- Inspect all exposed surfaces: Small mussels feel like sandpaper to the touch.
- Wash the hull of each watercraft thoroughly, preferably with high-pressure hot water.
- Remove all plants and animal material.
- Drain all water and dry all areas.
- Drain and dry the lower outboard unit.
- Clean and dry all live-wells.
- Empty and dry any buckets.
- Properly dispose of all bait.
- Wait five days and keep watercraft dry between launches into different fresh waters.

These steps are designed to thwart spread of the invasive mussels, safeguard boats and preserve high-quality fisheries.

Quagga mussels were first detected in the Great Lakes in 1989, resulting in hundreds of millions of dollars in damage to water delivery systems. They were first detected in the Colorado River system in January 2007 and were later found in San Diego and Riverside counties by state and local water agencies. Zebra mussels were discovered in San Justo Reservoir in San Benito County in January.

Thus far, no quagga or zebra mussels have been found in the State Water Project, which is closely monitored for these species by environmental scientists.

Both species of mussel are non-native aquatic mollusks that wreak havoc on the environment by disrupting the natural food chain and releasing toxins that affect other aquatic species. Although they range in size from microscopic to the size of a fingernail, they are prolific and attach themselves to hard and soft surfaces.

In addition to devastating the natural environment, quagga and zebra mussels pose a dramatic economic threat to California. The mussels can colonize on hulls, engines and steering components of boats, other recreational equipment, and can damage boat motors and restrict cooling. The invasive species also attach to aquatic plants, and submerged sediment and surfaces such as piers, pilings, water intakes, and fish screens. In doing this, water intake structures can be clogged, hampering the flow of water. The mussels frequently settle in massive colonies that can block water intake and threaten municipal water supply, agricultural irrigation and power plant operations.

Zebra mussels inhabit water depths from four to 180 feet, while quaggas can reach depths more than 400 feet. Both mollusks can attach to and damage boat trailers, cooling systems, boat hulls and steering equipment. Mussels attached to watercraft or trailers can be transported and spread to other water bodies. Water in boat engines, bilges, live wells and buckets can carry mussel larvae (called veligers) to other water bodies as well.

The task force is currently working to determine the extent of the quagga and zebra mussel threat and to educate watercraft users and water managers about what they can do to help.

As part of the public education effort, the state has facilitated nearly a dozen quagga/zebra inspection and decontamination trainings for more than 350 individuals in Lake County, San Diego, Redding, Fresno, Stockton, Monterey, Los Alamitos, Ontario, Sacramento and Yountville.

To date, the task force has distributed more than 1.75 million information cards and 1.2 million letters to registered boaters and other water users around the state about the quagga and zebra mussel danger.

A public toll-free hotline — 1-866-440-9530 — has also been established for information about destructive Quagga and Zebra mussels. The toll-free number is available Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For more information on the quagga/zebra mussel response, please visit the DFG Web site at www.dfg.ca.gov/invasives/quaggamussel.

For information about Lake County's prevention programs, visit www.co.lake.ca.us/Government/DepartmentDirectory/Water_Resources/Mussel_Prevention.htm.

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