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At a Glance

Adult zebra mussels elusive in lake search

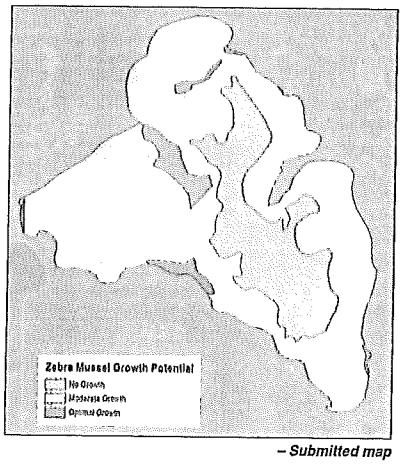
by Debra Neutkens
Regional Editor

WHITE BEAR LAKE — When a "rapid response team" searched for zebra mussels Sept. 30, one observation stood out: No adults were found.

To aquatic scientist Steve McComas, that meant one thing: "There was no chance for eradication."

In his annual report to the White Bear Lake Conservation District Nov. 18, McComas said the 10 volunteers searching for zebra hot spots found a mixed bag of mussels. One more zebra mussel was found at ground zero — the spot in the southeast bay where a snorkeler spotted the tiny invader — and at about a half-dozen other locations. But there were at least twice that many areas where no mussels were found. Those that were discovered were juveniles. That suggested there were adult mussels in the lake that hadn't been located and were spawn.

"That means the only option is to manage, control and monitor the invasive mussels," McComas said. The option is similar to other lakes in the state infested with zebra mussels: Gull, Pelican, Prior and Minnetonka, for example, he added. The invasive species were first spotted in an inland Minnesota lake in 1996.



– Submitted map

On the positive side, optimal growth or colonization requires hard surfaces, basically rock, which accounts for a small portion of White Bear Lake. Mussels can grow on sand and silt but that growth will be moderate at best.

As his accompanying map shows, zebra mussels cannot grow in blue areas of the lake. Water depths in those areas mean a lack of dissolvable oxygen, too low for zebras to survive.

When asked if the juvenile or "baby" mussels could have dropped off a boat, McComas said "no."

"We do consider that possibility, but once detached (from an object), juvenile zebra mussels don't move very far. Our map shows wide dispersal so they most likely drifted from some spawning point until finding a hard surface."

So what is the plan moving forward? "We will monitor water quality and changes at several sites," McComas said. "On the horizon, tools should become available for small-scale control such as a swimming beach, public access or fish spawning area."

Zebra mussels/see page 11A

Zebra mussels

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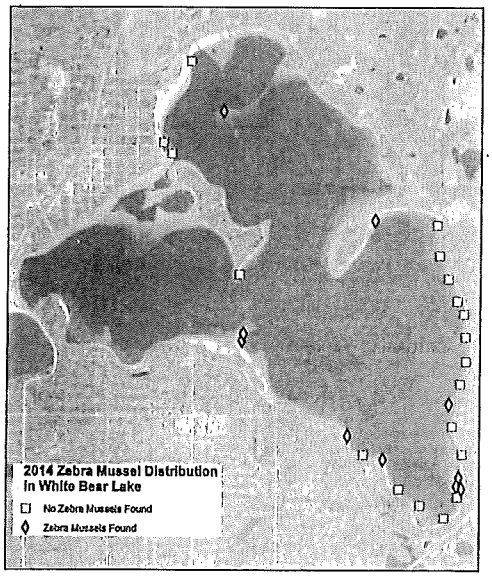
DNR invasive species expert Kylie Bloodsworth said the agency will continue to monitor the lake and search for the adult populations. "We still don't have a full picture," she noted. "We need to look at the western bay, the deeper spots for population sources. We've been doing it by scuba diving, which is very labor-intensive."



– Submitted map

Bloodsworth credits the snorkeler for alerting the agency back in September, which mobilized the volunteers. "We're not even in the water that late in the season," she said. "Had the biology teacher not reported finding three small zebra mussels, we wouldn't be looking at this; we wouldn't have done rapid response assessment. Boats would still be going in and out unaware of mussels in the lake."

She told the conservation board the DNR is working on control efforts and hopes to design protocol this winter for dealing with infestations. "Few lakes have treated zebra mussels. We are still experimenting with copper concentrations, long-term effects and the impact on nontarget species," she said.

As for Eurasian watermilfoil, "it's coming and going," McComas told the board.

This summer, only 32 acres were treated, which is about the lowest area ever on White Bear Lake. In 2010, when lake level was low, 170 acres were treated.

In his annual report to the board, McComas called the milfoil control "fairly effective."

Assessment of the treatment areas Aug. 29 showed about 29 acres had good control. The herbicide likely did not have long enough contact time with the several acres that appeared ineffective, he said.

Milfoil did come back later in the summer, however, in its usual places, observed board member Mike Parenteau. He figures at least 30 acres will require treatment in 2015; McComas said it will likely be more.

When it comes to water quality, phosphorus levels are relatively low and clarity remains stable. "White Bear Lake is still considered unimpaired and is very resilient," reported the water scientist. "The lake can take some insults but it's usually more of a blip than a long-term trend."