



Central and Eastern Montana Mussel Response: Summary of Stakeholder Concerns

Issues, Concerns, Opportunities

On March 8, a group of central and eastern Montana stakeholders met with Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) to voice concerns over how invasive mussels might affect our regions and what preventative measures can be taken to contain their spread. This group expressed concern about the seeming lack of preventative resources being directed toward Eastern Montana by the State. In response to this concern FWP expressed the desire to work with stakeholders in Eastern Montana to identify our regional needs. Watershed coordinators for the Missouri, Musselshell, Milk, Yellowstone, and Big Horn Rivers have coordinated the efforts to establish stakeholders for their area and solicit stakeholder input for their own regional needs. This report summarizes response from across Central and Eastern Montana on the issues surrounding invasive mussel prevention.

Identified Opportunities for Immediate Action by the Mussel Response Team

The Central and Eastern Montana Mussel Response Task Force gathered information from stakeholders across the region through an email survey, in-person and telephone discussion, and through follow-up from the March 8 meeting with FWP. These stakeholders include: county commissioners, town councils, conservation districts, water user associations, irrigation districts, watershed groups and concerned citizens. The following opportunities have been identified as actions that can be taken immediately and have considerable impact to invasive mussel prevention in the short-term.

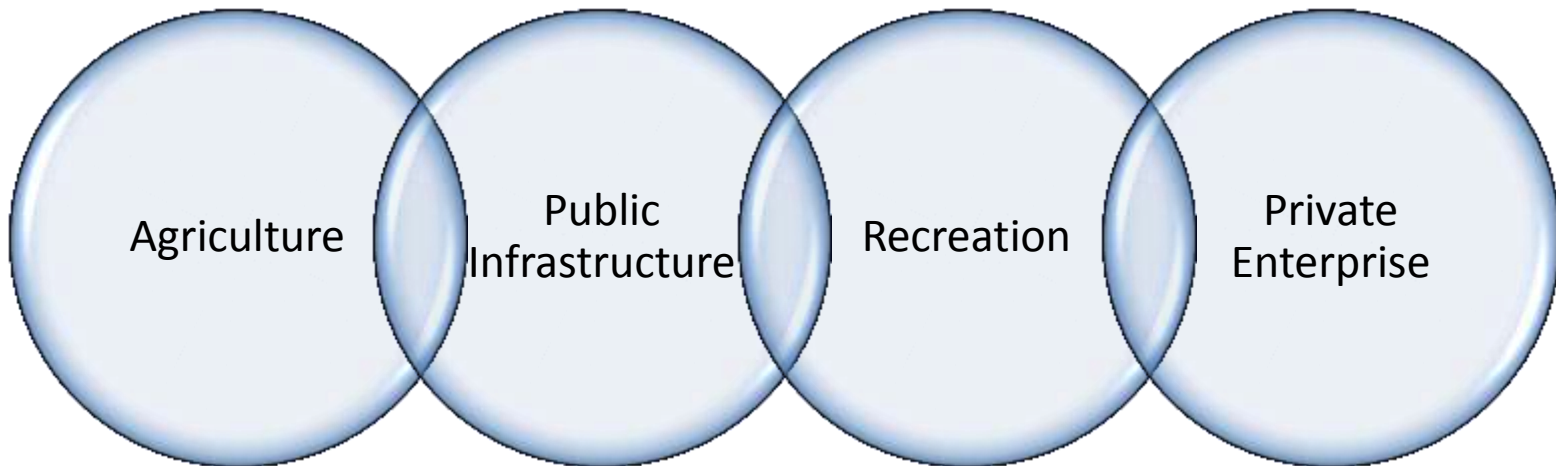
1. **Check the box prior to license purchase** - Require verification (a check box or something similar) that a purchaser has read the information about mussels and agrees to comply with the inspection and decontamination requirements for boats in Montana waters before being allowed to purchase a fishing license. This should apply to all fishing license purchases, online as well as at license providers.
2. **Attitude of Wardens and check-station workers** - The effectiveness of the check stations and decontamination efforts are dependent on the cooperative participation by Montana's public and out-of-state visiting recreationists. Public perception that wardens are using inspection stations as a way to find any violation of the law and enforcing punitive action will discourage the voluntary cooperation this effort is dependent upon.
3. **Gather information for future guidance of plan** - Wardens can greatly improve the effectiveness of the state's plan by gathering information on visitor's route and destination to help guide future check station locations.
4. **Outreach to water users** - Education and outreach materials for irrigators, rural water system users, and the fracking industry is imperative and needs to be developed and distributed.
5. **Sign revisions** – Signage needs to have more aggressive language that warns of consequences along with contact information, or a scannable QR/barcode, that provides readers with a place to find check- station or decontamination unit locations.
6. **Bighorn Lake Inspection Station** – Bighorn Lake and Bighorn River cannot be left unprotected. In addition to inspecting boats launching at Bighorn Lake, a station in this area can also check traffic traveling from the south into Montana.
7. **Penalties** – The penalty for not complying with AIS rules needs to be a strong deterrent. The fines for noncompliance need to be increased and the option of quarantining offenders' boats should be exercised.

Immediate Information Requests of the Mussel Response Team

The task force is working locally to coordinate education and outreach, on-the-ground, and planning efforts aimed at preventing the spread of invasive mussels. In order to be able to both inform our partners about mussel response actions being taken by the State of Montana and to more effectively implement local activities, the following information is requested of the Mussel Response Team:

- Current locations of inspection stations that will be operating the summer of 2017.
- Current locations of inspection stations that have staff hired and hours of operation for these stations.
- Current locations of inspection stations that staff has not yet been hired.
- A map of all signage locations planned by FWP and other Agency Partners (BOR, ACOE, BLM, USFWS, etc)
- Contact information for staff that is designated to give informational presentations to local interested groups. If there is no one available, is there a powerpoint available for others to present at meetings?
- The distribution plan for the mussel response rack cards.
- The notification process for non-resident boaters to alert them of the requirement to check their boat before launch.
- Contacts for local game wardens and check-station staff so that we can be in contact about fishing and other local events (i.e. Wheatland County Centennial Celebration).

Resources of Most Concern



Central and Eastern Montana is home to wide-open spaces and few people. Agriculture is the largest industry. Areas surrounding Fort Peck Lake and Big Horn Lake also have a large amount of recreation. These two industries would be significantly impacted by an invasive mussel infestation.

Potential impacts to agriculture, and specifically, irrigation, is the most prevalent concern. Additionally, many of the small towns and cities in Central and Eastern Montana already struggle to keep water systems operating. Aging infrastructure and declining populations in many areas intensify the many issues surrounding water systems and an invasive mussel infestation would doom many small towns. Similarly, several Eastern Montana communities are working on rural water systems to provide clean and reliable water to their members. If an invasive mussel infestation took hold in these systems, they would also no longer be viable.

Potential impacts to the recreation industry are also of high concern. Related to both agriculture and recreation are the private enterprises that supply these industries.

Watershed Groups

Musselshell Watershed Coalition (MWC) – The MWC is comprised of water-user groups, conservation districts, landowners, counties and towns, and state and federal agencies across Musselshell, Golden Valley, Wheatland, Garfield, and Petroleum Counties. The Coalition focuses on water quantity, quality, and also provides planning and outreach to the diverse entities involved.

Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC) – The Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC) is comprised of the 15 Conservation Districts that border or contain the mainstem of the Missouri River. The mission of the MRCDC is to represent natural resource and environmental interests on the Missouri River. The Council believes the conservation of the river and the sustainability of its various uses can best be accomplished through grassroots collaboration, education, incentives, and voluntary action.

Yellowstone River Conservation Districts Council (YRCDC) - The YRCDC is made up of representatives from eleven conservation districts bordering the main stem of the Yellowstone River. The YRDCD's purpose is to provide local leadership, assistance, and guidance for the wise use and conservation of the Yellowstone River's natural resources.

Bighorn River Alliance – The Bighorn River Alliance (BHRA) works to preserve, protect and enhance the wild trout fisheries of the Bighorn River. Through collaborative relationships with fly-fisherman, state/federal agencies, water users and area tribes, the BHRA monitors Bighorn River health concerns and the recreational fishery.

Milk River Watershed Alliance - The Milk River Watershed Alliance is a locally led organization working together to preserve, protect and enhance natural resources within the Milk River Watershed, while maintaining the quality of life.

Key Stakeholder Groups

The following is a master list of types of stakeholders that should be educated about invasive mussels and part of the effort to prevent their spread. This list was compiled by central and eastern Montana watershed group partners.

Local Governments

- City Governments
- Conservation Districts
- County Commissioners
- Montana League of Cities and Towns
- Montana Association of Counties

Agriculture/Rural Water

- Montana Association of Ditches and Canals
- Montana Water Resources Association
- Montana Stockgrowers Association
- Montana Farm Bureau Federation
- Montana Farmers Union

Irrigation Companies
Irrigators
Local Stockgrowers' Associations
Montana Section of American Water Works Association

Federal Government

Forest Service
Army Corps of Engineers
Bureau of Land Management
Bureau of Reclamation
National Park Service US
Fish and Wildlife Service
Natural Resources and Conservation Service

State Government

MSU Extension Office
State Parks Staff
Department of Environmental Quality

Tribal Governments

Crow
Northern Cheyenne
Fort Peck Tribes
Fort Belknap Tribes
Rocky's Boy Tribes

Recreation

Fishing and Hunting Organizations
Marina Operators
Recreationists
State Park Concessionaires
Montana Outfitters and Guides Association
Local Business Owners
Trout Unlimited
Walleyes Unlimited
Montana Pike Masters

Private Landowners

Cabin Owners Associations on Reservoirs

Other

Non-Government Organizations
Watershed Groups
Engineers
Contractors

Opportunities for Local Outreach

Stakeholders identified several local opportunities for providing education and outreach to local groups. These local groups include:

- Watershed Group Meetings and Partner Visits
- Conservation District Outdoor Classrooms
- City/County News and Events Websites
- Local Stockgrowers' Associations
- Local Farm Bureau Associations
- FFA and 4-H groups
- Newspaper Outdoor Sections
- RV and Boat Shows
- Fishing Tournaments
- Walleye Chapter Annual Meetings
- Fish and Wildlife Organizations
- Local Schools

Local Resources

Several stakeholders identified ways that entities can assist in invasive mussel prevention at the local level. These included:

- Watershed Group and Conservation District events and education efforts to include invasive species education
- Aquatic Invasive Species grant monies
- Sponsorship/application for other grant monies
- Partnering with Walleye's Unlimited
- Explore a volunteer program to staff an inspection station

The Central and Eastern Montana Mussel Response Task Force

The Task Force is a local resource that is willing and desiring to work with FWP to prevent the spread of invasive mussels. Some opportunities to partner include:

1. Provide invasive mussel prevention information to specific stakeholder groups (agriculture, city water systems, rural water systems, recreation, etc.).
2. Create aggressive signage that has consistent messaging with existing signage.
3. Determine locations for signage.
4. Determine most strategic locations for inspection stations.
5. Determine opportunities for outreach to resident and non-resident audiences. Follow-up engagement with those audiences.
6. Assist in inspection station position descriptions, advertisement of positions, and hiring of positions.

Expectations for Collaborative Efforts

The Central and Eastern Montana Mussel Response Task Force

The Task Force will be working through the spring and summer of 2017 at the local level to prevent the spread of invasive mussels. Expectations for this group include:

- Public meetings to be held around Fort Peck Lake to provide information and to conduct a local needs assessment for these communities.
- Targeted information presentations to special interest groups (fishing groups, water user groups, city and county governments, etc.)
- Installation of Clean Drain Dry signage
- Distribution of Mussel Response Rack Cards
- Creation of educational signage to complement the Clean Drain Dry Signage
- Continued collection of strategic inspection station locations

The Mussel Response Team

The Task Force expects the following through the spring and summer of 2017 of the Mussel Response Team:

- Continued communication with the Task Force from the Mussel Response Team and FWP staff of ongoing developments.
- FWP cooperation and assistance with outreach efforts as much as possible.
- Planning meetings to discuss future locations for inspection stations in Central and Eastern Montana.
- A Year-in-Review meeting in the fall of 2017 to discuss how the mussel response plan performed and any necessary changes as well as continue opportunities for partnership.

Central and Eastern Montana Mussel Response Task Force Contacts

Coordinator

Laura Nowlin
Musselshell Watershed Coalition
429-4832
musselshellwc@gmail.com

Liaison to the Mussel Response Team

Rachel Frost
Missouri River Conservation Districts Council
454-0056
mrcdc@macdnet.org

Supervisor

Steve Tyrrel
Lower Musselshell Conservation District Supervisor
855-7600
tyrrel@midrivers.com