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Montana Casting Doubt on Mussel Prevention in the Northwest It's Time for Idaho to Step Up its Game

Invasive Dreissenid mussels, commonly referred to as quagga and zebra mussels, were first discovered in the western U.S. in 2007 at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area in Nevada. Since then, state governments throughout the West have spent millions of dollars to prevent similar finds in their own waterways. Idaho was the first state to implement a user fee for water recreationists to fund a highly successful prevention program, which includes roadside watercraft inspection stations aimed at protecting state and regional waters. Fremont County has been participating in this important program since its inception.

Preventing mussel infestations in Idaho makes environmental and economic sense. These non-native filter-feeding mussels have the potential to crash the region's delicate aquatic food webs, and infestations will jeopardize salmon recovery efforts. The fouling organisms also pose a serious threat to Idaho's economy. If infestations are not prevented, infrastructure, including hydropower dams, irrigated agriculture systems and municipal water supplies are all at risk. Conservative estimates of costs associated with coping with these organisms if they establish in Idaho waters approach a staggering \$100 million annually.

Until October 2016, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Wyoming and Montana were the only western states that had successfully kept invasive mussels from infesting their waters. That changed when the State of Montana detected the immature stage of the mussels (also known as "veligers") in the Tiber Reservoir. In addition, "suspect" detections turned up in Canyon Ferry Reservoir. Immediately following the finds, Montana's Governor wisely chose to close the waterbodies to boating and recreation. Because trailered watercraft are the highest risk pathway for these organisms to hopscotch to other waters, this quarantine was scientifically sound. Montana formed a Mussel Response Team and began the process of obtaining additional funding to deal with the mussel outbreak. These actions were reassuring to Fremont County and the other uninfested western states, all of whom continue to spend a significant amount of resources and funding on prevention programs.

Surprisingly, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) just announced that several previously scheduled fishing tournaments on the state's mussel-impacted waterbodies will go on as planned in the spring and summer of 2017. The tournament organizers vow that they will notify the hundreds of tournament participants that they should take precautions to decontaminate boats when they leave infested waters after the tournament, but this will only help up to a point. Although boats may be visually inspected for adult mussels, the veligers are invisible to the naked eye. Hot water decontaminations, which would help destroy the veligers will not be mandatory for departing boats. According to a FWP spokesperson, "We believe these contests can be held safely with additional restrictions that further protect the fishery." But what about the neighboring states? From Fremont County's perspective, conducting these fishing tournaments on mussel-impacted waters in Montana poses a huge risk to the region's

waters, fisheries and economies. Canyon Ferry reservoir is a mere 2.5 hour drive to Henrys Lake, Idaho. It is inevitable that some of the tournament participants will make that drive after the event. It is also likely that some of them will unknowingly carry invasive mussels on their watercraft as invisible veligers on anything wet. By opening these impacted waterbodies to recreation, the state of Montana is setting a bad precedent and seriously jeopardizing the region's hard fought prevention efforts. Henrys Fork generates \$50 million annually for our county – we cannot afford to lose it.

Given the threats posed to the region's environment and economy, it seems sensible and necessary for the State of Montana to reconsider this action. At a minimum, the State of Montana should require mandatory decontaminations when boats and equipment leave these impacted waters. The risk of moving these destructive organisms is too great, and the region has worked too hard over the last decade to let our waters be jeopardized by something as preventable as this. The Idaho Legislature is debating plan S1068 to bolster Idaho's invasive species program. We support this legislation and ask that the state step up its efforts to protect Idaho from this threat. Fremont County realizes that this problem can only be effectively addressed as a region, and we must all step up our game to keep these mussels out of our waters. We need all hands on deck to prevent this environmental and economic disaster.


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