

Dallas Morning News

Zebra mussels seen as threat to Dallas-area lakes

12:00 AM CDT on Thursday, August 20, 2009

By ED HOUSEWRIGHT / The Dallas Morning News
ehousewright@dallasnews.com

http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/localnews/stories/DN-zebra_20met.ART.State.Edition2.4c08d74.html

For a tiny critter, the zebra mussel can cause huge problems.

The fingernail-size bivalves, new to these parts, have taken up residence in Lake Texoma and likely moved south into Lavon Lake, according to state officials.

Zebra mussels clog water pipes, endanger fish by gobbling up their food supply, attach to boats like magnets and line beaches with their razor-sharp edges.

Worse, they multiply at a dizzying rate, and no one knows how to eradicate them.

"I've learned more about them than I ever cared to learn," said Heath McLane, Lavon Lake manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the North Texas Municipal Water District share his concern.

State biologists have placed testing devices in Lavon Lake to check for zebra mussels, named for their striped, yellow-brown shells. On Monday, officials plan to take water samples to check for microscopic larvae, which mature into the pesky mussels.

"While we have no proof, we feel certain zebra mussels are in Lake Lavon," said Bruce Hysmith, inland fisheries biologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife.

He works at Lake Texoma, where zebra mussels were first spotted in the water on April 3. Earlier this month, mussels were detected about 25 miles south in Sister Grove Creek, which feeds into Lavon Lake.

The Texas Municipal Water District has stopped pumping water from Lake Texoma into Lavon Lake, the largest drinking water source in North Texas. It supplies water to 1.5 million people in 60 towns, including Plano, McKinney, Frisco, Richardson, Garland and Mesquite.

The water district will study ways to remove zebra mussels if they attach to pipes leading into its treatment plant, said spokeswoman Denise Hickey. Any larvae sucked into the plants would be killed by the treatment process and won't contaminate the water supply, she said.

"We will be taking to our board of directors a recommendation for an engineering consulting contract," Hickey said. "They will work with us if any [zebra mussels] are found and what strategies we need to do."

On the lookout

After water leaves Lavon Lake, it drains into the Trinity River Basin, which extends to the Gulf of Mexico.

Zebra mussels, first seen in the Great Lakes in the late 1980s, may now be permanent Texas residents. They can grow to more than an inch long and survive outside of water for several days.

"We weren't looking for them before, but we are now," said Martin Bowles, managing partner of the 137-slip East Fork Harbor on Lavon Lake. "As far as we know, there's nothing we can do to keep them at bay."

Bowles said he hasn't spotted any mussels near his marina on the lake's southwest shoreline. But he plans to encourage his boaters and those who use the nearby public boat ramp to clean their boats thoroughly.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers echoes that advice. It has posted signs around Lavon Lake, telling boaters to follow these precautions:

- Drain all water from the boat upon leaving the lake.
- Inspect the boat and scrape off any zebra mussels.
- Wash the boat and trailer with high-pressure, 140-degree water.
- Allow them to dry and wait a week before re-entering the water.

Warnings abound

More than 20 states, including Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana, have battled zebra mussels.

Nationwide campaigns are under way to limit their spread. They employ catchy slogans, such as Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers, Lose the Hitchhikers or Lose Your Lake, and Don't Move a Mussel.

Web sites warning of zebra mussels proliferate.

"The potential for zebra mussels to spread is very high," according to www.protectyourwaters.net, sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Coast Guard.

"In fact, several bills are in front of Congress that focus on preventing the westward spread of zebra mussels."

Texas Parks and Wildlife has established a hotline to report suspected sightings. The toll-free number is 1-800-792-4263.

"Zebra mussels have the potential to be an even greater threat to Texas freshwater resources than invasive aquatic plants, such as giant salvinia, and toxic organisms, such as golden alga," said Phil Durocher, director of the Parks and Wildlife's Inland Fisheries Division.

Staff writer Matthew Haag contributed to this report.

FAIR USE NOTICE

This document contains copyrighted material whose use has not been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. The Texas Living Waters Project, which is a nonprofit undertaking, is making this article available in our efforts to promote comprehensive water planning in Texas. We believe that this constitutes a "fair use" of the copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. If you wish to use this copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond "fair use", you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.