

Record number of boat inspections in '20, despite COVID

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by Javier Serna



A variety of parties, from COs with K9s to inspectors hired by lake associations, check boats for AIS. Photo courtesy of Minnesota DNR

DNR faces a second year of fewer staff inspectors

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St. Paul — Even with the Minnesota DNR hiring fewer watercraft inspectors last year due to a hiring freeze during the pandemic, a record number of inspections happened in the state, according to Adam Doll, the agency's Watercraft Inspection Program coordinator.

The inspections are intended to stop the spread of aquatic invasive species, which are known to hitch rides on boats and related equipment.

Doll said a record high 606,000 watercraft inspections occurred in 2020, due in large part to the agency's unique partnership with about 60 different groups that use funding from county aid, which was put in place in 2015 by the state Legislature.

"That is where the bulk of our effort comes from," Doll said. "The program is still operating efficiently. It is part of the recipe for success."

Doll said Minnesota has one of the largest inspection programs in the country, trailing only Colorado.

"We wouldn't have close to 800 inspectors in the field without those 60 partners," Doll said, noting that while those inspectors answer to their local entities, they are trained by the DNR and follow DNR protocol in carrying out inspections.

"Whether you're being inspected by one of our inspectors or a county-partner inspector, the experience should be the same," he said.

Doll said it's defined in state statute who are eligible to partner with the DNR on inspections. It must be a local unit of government, he said.

"Anybody from a lake improvement district on up," Doll said, noting that, in general, lake associations don't have legal standing on their own. "But most of the programs are cities, townships, counties, soil and water conservation districts, and park districts."

The most inspectors any such partner has are the 100 inspectors trained for the metro area Three Rivers Park District, Doll said. He added that 40% of the partners have fewer than 10 inspectors.

Doll said it appears that about 680 lakes had inspections for at least one day in 2020.

While about 750 inspectors worked under the county aid program, DNR inspectors themselves were fewer in 2020, Doll said.

The DNR hired 64 inspectors in 2020, which is short of the goal of about 90 inspectors. Of those 64, some were interns, but the hiring of Level 2 inspectors – seasonal staff – was hampered by hiring restrictions.

"We were able to hire interns, but we weren't able to fill any vacancies for our Level 2s," he said. "In general, 2020 was a challenging year. We are still under a hiring freeze, and we weren't able to fill those during the pandemic."

This year, he said, the DNR plans to hire 58 interns.

Doll said watercraft inspections in Minnesota are funded via three sources.

The first is the state's general fund. The second is the state's invasive species account, via a surcharge on watercraft registrations (that was increased for the first time in 20 years in 2019 to \$10.60, and this session, Gov. Tim Walz is seeking to round that increase up to the nearest dollar – \$11). Finally, watercraft inspections are funded through the federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

"Before the surcharge increase, we were headed into the negative," said Heidi Wolf, the DNR's Invasive Species Program supervisor.

The program's annual report breaks that down further, showing that \$4,924,000 came from a general fund appropriation, with most of that (\$4.6 million) supporting the Aquatic Invasive Species Program and the rest (\$279,000) supporting the Terrestrial Invasive Species Program.

Of that, \$2,849,827 came from the \$10.60 surcharge on watercraft registrations, \$1,170,343 from a \$5 fee on nonresident fishing licenses, and \$152,830 from "monies appropriated in the 2020-2021 biennium."

The report adds that in the fiscal year 2020, expenditures from federal sources were \$831,628.

The total expenditure for the DNR's invasive species program in fiscal year 2020 was \$9,784,042, according to the annual report, which noted \$146,460 also came from the state's Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, which is generated by proceeds from the state lottery.

Of those expenditures, 44% was spent on inspections and enforcement, 29% was spent on state and regional coordination, 13% was spent on management/control, 10% was spent on administration, 4% was spent on education/public awareness and no money was spent on research.

Wolf noted that money for county aid funding is not included. That's about \$10 million that goes directly to the counties from the state.

"That doesn't pass through us," she said. "It's a completely different pot."

Doll said that when that money became available in 2015, an influx of county-level programs started up.

"Between 2018 and 2020, we pretty much plateaued," he said. "The vast majority of the groups interested in doing this work are doing it at this point."

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