

Game and Fish: Clean, drain and dry your watercraft

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Boaters are encouraged to be extra vigilant in cleaning, draining and drying their watercraft to avoid spreading aquatic invasive species this summer.

“With water levels dropping and being low in a lot of reservoirs this year, it’s probably more likely that you’ll pick up vegetation on your trailer and watercraft,” said Reed Moore, aquatic invasive species specialist for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department’s Sheridan region. “Best practice is to remove any vegetation on watercraft or if you’re fishing and get it hooked in your line, make sure it’s not on your watercraft.”

Wyoming has ramped up its efforts to prevent the transmission of AIS amid detections of invasive quagga and zebra mussels in bordering states. The Sheridan region doubled its AIS staff in summer 2023 when zebra mussels were found in western South Dakota’s Pactola Lake. The department has maintained that staffing level, and 17 technicians now inspect watercraft at six check stations between Sheridan and the South Dakota border, Moore said. Though South Dakota has since had an additional detection at Sheridan Lake, 7 miles from Pactola, Wyoming has still not detected zebra or quagga mussels within its borders.

Check stations are located at the border and at certain high-traffic water bodies, including Lake DeSmet. Lake DeSmet is staffed with technicians Thursday through Sunday during the summer months.

From March 1 through Nov. 30, all watercraft entering Wyoming from out of state are required to be inspected before launching on a Wyoming water body. Anyone transporting a watercraft is also required to stop when they encounter an open check station.

Invasive quagga and zebra mussels can spread quickly and vastly once they enter a water body. And if



Bulletin photo courtesy of Wyoming Game and Fish

Wyoming Game and Fish Department Sheridan Region fisheries biologist Gordon Edwards inspects an out-of-state boat in 2019 that had invasive mussels attached.

one or several are stuck to a watercraft, they can then establish in the next water source where that watercraft is launched.

Zebra and quagga mussels can filter out algae and other nutrients that are food sources for native species. Depending where they spread, they can also clog or damage water infrastructure.

During Memorial Day Weekend, technicians flagged a boat at Lake DeSmet that had last been used on the Tennessee River, a water body known to have these species. Standing water was found on the boat, which could have contained juvenile mussels, so technicians sent it to Sheridan for decontamination, Moore said. During a decontamination, the inspector sprays exterior and interior compartments with scalding water to remove and kill invasive species that may be on the watercraft and then follows up with another inspection to ensure that the process was successful.

In 2025, technicians conducted 1,843 total inspections at Lake DeSmet, 21 of which were considered high-risk inspections. The Sheridan region recorded 14,726 total inspections.

Mussels aren’t the only AIS that

technicians are looking for. Lake DeSmet already has an AIS called curly leaf pondweed, which has also been established in Keyhole and Tongue River reservoirs. This invasive vegetation outcompetes native vegetation and can disrupt lake ecosystems.

“A fragment of a plant can settle into sediment and start growing again,” Moore said. “With water levels being low, we’re going to get into where there’s lots of vegetation below developed concrete boat ramps. Where people back watercraft to the bottom of those, where there will be vegetation growing.”

Though check station requirements apply only to watercraft from out of state, there is still a risk of transporting an AIS from one impacted water body to another that had not been previously impacted, Moore said.

The first line of defense against AIS is clean, drain, dry, according to Game and Fish. Boats and trailers should be cleaned of visible plant materials and mud. All compartments should be drained between uses, especially ballast tanks, live wells and bilges, where water can pool and remain for long periods of time.