

VILAS COUNTY NEWS REVIEW
AIS PARTNERSHIP YEAR 1 IN REVIEW

The three year Vilas County Aquatic Invasive Species Partnership project has entered year two. I am extremely pleased with the accomplishments of the first year. Awareness of the risks that non-native invasive live forms represent to the lakes of northern Wisconsin has soared in and around Vilas County. Active volunteer participation has paralleled that awareness trend. This has been an exhilarating project to be associated with. My personal objective for the next two years as Project Coordinator is to keep up with the pace of the growing army of volunteers.

The most significant accomplishments of year #1:

1. Active participation by town boards: Lake management issues have typically not been items on most town board agendas. However, by the conclusion of this past year, many Vilas County town boards had enabled representatives of local lake organizations to come together and be recognized as standing committees of local government. At least eight of those town committees will be submitting grant applications for proactive **town-wide** projects prior to the February 1st grant cycle deadline. To further demonstrate their support of the committees, several town boards have committed funding from their 2006 budgets to support the objectives of their committees. **To have hoped for this level of support from town boards at the initiation of this project would have been overly optimistic. This has been the single most important accomplishment and the one that will enable great progress to be made by volunteers.**
2. The cumulative county wide projects planned for 2006, pending approval of numerous WDNR cost share funding requests, include:
 - A. Placement of trained volunteer watercraft inspection teams during peak activity periods **at as many as 50% of public boat landings across the County.** These teams will not only inspect boats and trailers for unwanted hitchhikers, but will inform the boating public of the realities of aquatic invasive species and how easily they can be spread by boaters.
 - B. Conducting professional **plant surveys and developing long term plant management plans on as many as 40 lakes** including ten lakes on the lower portion of the Eagle River chain.
3. Implementation of strategies to reach out to potential visitors to Vilas County and request that they properly clean their boats, trailers and related watercraft equipment before leaving home:
 - A. Many chambers of commerce are following the lead of the Vilas County Advertising Department by **allocating space in their 2006 travel guides for AIS prevention messages.**
 - B. The Musky Clubs Alliance of Wisconsin partnered with the Eagle River Chamber of Commerce to introduce a practice that will hopefully be picked up by other tournament organizers. Registered participants are reminded via a special mailer approximately 10 days prior to the tournament of **the importance of properly cleaning equipment before coming to Vilas County.**
4. The **Legislative Field Day** in August, which was intended as an opportunity for State Legislators to see first hand what aquatic invasive species are doing to northern WI lakes and visit with the Vilas AIS Partnership, was well attended by project supporters, but **did not attract a single law maker.** Their absence inspired a discussion by attendees of techniques that might be used to solicit the needed support of all WI Legislators. One result of that discussion was a written request to all Vilas Town Board Chairmen to consider **including a notice in all December tax statements encouraging all property owners, especially those who are non-residents and receive their tax bills outside of Vilas County, to contact their local representatives via telephone or letters.**

Many towns responded positively to the suggestion. Another idea that spawned action was to **solicit the support of other areas of the State via the Wisconsin Towns Association**. A resolution calling for additional AIS funding was advanced at the WTA annual meeting in October which in turn prompted WTA support of proposed legislation. A series of AIS educational articles will be drafted for inclusion in 2006 WTA monthly newsletters.

5. 2005 Wisconsin **Assembly Bill 757**, introduced this fall in part by District 34 Rep. Dan Meyer of Eagle River, **calls for an annual \$5 million allocation** of funds from Indian gaming receipts **to manage AIS infestations**. While far more than that is needed to manage state-wide infestations already known to exist, this proposal is a positive step and therefore critical. **The Eurasian water-milfoil infestations known to exist in Vilas County already will cost an estimated \$1 million annually to manage if control measures are put in place by 2006**. The cost will escalate rapidly with each year that the infestations are allowed to spread, especially as they expand to un-infested lakes. Funding is needed not only in Vilas County, but throughout the State as all infested water bodies are the source of continued spread as recreational equipment moves around the State carrying invasive species hitchhikers.

The challenges ahead:

1. Most Vilas County waterbodies are still free of non-native invasive life forms. While impressive efforts to maintain that status will be employed, preventing the spread of these invaders cannot be fully accomplished locally. **Prevention MUST include aggressive management of established infestations state-wide as those infestations are the sources of further spread**. However, management is very expensive and present funding is grossly insufficient. Therefore, **we must ALL become part of the effort to convince lawmakers to find sustainable funding sources**. The "ALL" in this statement includes non-waterfront property owners who tend to think that aquatic invasive species do not impact them. They need to understand that **devaluation of waterfront property will cause a property valuation shift such that non-waterfront properties will carry more of the local tax burden**. Lawmakers, and the electorate who puts them in office, need to embrace the concept of the Wisconsin Public Trust Doctrine and accept the fact that lakes and streams are publicly owned, free for everyone to use and enjoy, and therefore the responsibility of the public to maintain. It is truly in the best interest of everyone that funding be found to fight this war and the sooner the better! My greatest fear with this project is that the mass of people are volunteering their time to help stop the AIS spread will lose enthusiasm and give up if they see local infestations spread in spite of their best efforts. **We MUST win some battles with existing infestations if we expect the army to stay in tact to win the war!**
2. The Vilas AIS Action Teams will:
 - A. Continue looking for ways to educate lake users, especially potential future visitors to Vilas County, of the importance of understanding how to stop the spread of AIS.
 - B. Continue building working relationships with researchers to learn more about the characteristics of individual species and share that information with Town Lakes Committees and the general public.
 - C. Continue tracking and quantifying all AIS infestations throughout Vilas County.
 - D. Attempt to assemble information regarding the consequences of AIS infestations and develop a statement of the economic impacts of AIS
 - E. Prepare a draft of new Wisconsin AIS ordinances and solicit widespread support for implementation of meaningful laws