

Chairman McNutt and members of the House Appropriations Committee. I am Verdell Jackson Senate District 5 which includes Bigfork, Somers, Lakeside and Lower Kalispell.

I rise to oppose HB 621 for three main reasons:

First, HB 621 takes over the Aquatic Invasive Species program which I started with a bill last session. I did not see HB 621 until Friday last week and was not given any opportunity to provide input.

Second, HB 621 does not address the program that has been operating for 2 years or make the changes needed in statute to implement mandatory check stations and many other components of the program to be implemented in the next two years. The bill is written as if we are starting over with very little direction. The risk of Zebra infection is too costly to take such a risk.

Third, I sponsored SB 343 this session which has 52 co-sponsors. SB 343 continues the program and makes statute changes to implement the next phase of the program. This bill passed out of Senate Agriculture 11-0 as amended, had second reading in the Senate, passed 44-6 and then was sent to Senate Finance and Claims where it passed out 18-1.

I need to tell you a little about the program to enable you to understand why the Department of agriculture was selected to coordinate the program.

The main purpose of the program is to stop the Zebra mussel from infecting Montana's lakes and rivers.

The Flathead Lakers, 1500 members, contacted me and asked me to carry the AIS bill and they provided me a draft. While working on it, I was contacted by the Agriculture Department and the Governor's office who assisted in writing the bill and the funding was placed in the Governor's budget.

The reason the invasive species program was put in the Agriculture two years ago was that the program was a new program with the purpose of preventing the Zebra and Quagga mussels from infecting Montana's lakes and rivers. Fish, wildlife and Parks had an AIS program for 4 years, but it was invisible. I had not heard of the Zebra mussel until the Flathead Lakers contacted me. These mussels once started would cause extensive damage to irrigation equipment, power plants and our fisheries. The emphasis is on border check stations which are handled by Ag. They also check for Aquatic invasive weeds such as Milfole.

The first phase of the program after last session was to make the public aware that the mussels were going to come from boats that had been used in infected water. The public information program was extensive. Newspaper articles, radio, bill boards, mailings, brochures, signs, bumper stickers, posters, training sessions, classroom presentations and conferences have made the entire state aware of the risks. The Flathead Lakers, one of the many stakeholder groups involved, has 1500 members. They have featured the mussel problem in most of their newsletters during the last two years. Also, many of their members have volunteered to help put up signs and other activities. Brochures are being distributed by weed districts, conservation districts, tribes, extension services, and many other agencies. I believe that the Agriculture Department has done a great job of educating the public by effective use of the media and meeting and communicating with hundreds of people who make up the stakeholder groups. They have gained their support and help. The second phase was to check boats and recreation vehicles at

Montana borders. The Agriculture Department set up 18 voluntary roving border inspection stations around the state in such places as Eureka, Troy, Dene Mora, Lime, Bridger, Broadus, Wibaux, Sidney, Fort Peck, West Yellowstone, etc.

The third phase to begin after this session is to designate Montana a statewide management area using authority given in SB 343. This will allow mandatory check stations to be set up on roads likely to have boats entering Montana from mussel infected states. Also, we want to lay the ground work to get a presence at the border stations and park entrances. We are hoping with support of the Governor's office we can involve the staff at the border crossings and park entrances and police officers.

We are also working to make this program self funded through a fee to boat owners and grants from the power companies. Lastly we are stepping our involvement and communication with surrounding states.

I am strongly opposed to SB 621 and believe that the Department of Agriculture is the right place for this new program. The coordination with Fish, Wildlife and Parks was a problem in the beginning, but I am now confident that the problems have been worked out and will be reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among the Departments of Agriculture, Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Natural Resources and the governor's office. I will continue to be involved in developing the MOU if SB 343 survives.

1. The program needs separation from "business as usual" for the time being.
2. Program started in Ag. Don't need the risk of moving it.
3. SB 343 is a new bill molded by stakeholders. I have 4 lakes and Flathead River in my district.
4. Program striving in Ag, especially in the Western Montana.
5. Needs accountability. Coordination language is in SB343 & in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Includes reporting and accountability. Ron de Young, Joe Morea, Mike Voleski and me.
6. Needs to be cost effective
7. Meetings, training and workshops that stockholders and I attend are mainly in Kalispell and Helena.

Senator Verdell Jackson