

A Blueprint for Improving AIS in Montana (Draft)

Introduction: We've made great strides in addressing the threat of AIS in Montana, and all three agencies are to be commended for their good work. The program is now at a point where it needs to mature. As the threat becomes more acute, our focus as a state needs to sharpen, and sharpen quickly.

Step one: Strengthen our current regulatory structure to improve program efficiency/effectiveness.

Proposal: Consolidate the regulatory structure by redrawing the lines of authority over AIS, from plants vs. animals (the current split) to water vs. land. AIS regulatory functions currently housed in Agriculture should be moved to FWP.

Under current law this can be accomplished by MOU.

This will require the transfer of employees, funding, and equipment.

(possible statutory changes may include the need to strengthen existing regulatory authority over standing water on watercraft, the ability to quarantine fouled watercraft and emergency powers – should we mandate that all boats entering the state must be inspected prior to launching in any state waters?)

Agriculture continues involvement in AIS through its administration of funding of AIS activities from the Noxious Weed Trust Fund, and should coordinate this funding with FWP and DNRC.

Proposal: Move the AIS program in FWP from the Hatchery Bureau to the Habitat Bureau, to emphasize connection to habitat. It's important to recognize the logical connections with hatcheries (fish transfers), fish health lab (pathogens), wildlife, enforcement and the exotic species committee.

Proposal: Bring the Department of Transportation into the AIS fold to ensure that all commercially hauled boats entering the state are adequately inspected at Ports of Entry. The experience in Idaho shows that the DOT stations at the border are an important interception point for AIS. This can be accomplished by cooperative agreement and primarily involves training of personnel and notification, inspection, and reporting protocols.

Proposal: Retain the DNRC grant program, which has proven to be very successful for control, eradication, and surveying. Continue survey efforts to better guide watercraft inspection, quarantine, and control efforts.

Proposal: Expand the use of cooperative agreements with local agencies, such as weed districts, tribes, the Flathead Basin Commission, etc., to expand our network of boots on the ground. Expand training opportunities for local agencies/cooperators.

Proposal: All AIS information (survey, control, inspection) is housed at NRIS and is accessible to all interested parties.

Proposal: Adjust the nuts and bolts of the program based on a careful review of the Idaho program, other successful state programs, and our experience to date, including:

- extending the inspection seasons and hours of daily operation,
- improving inspection station operations such as uniform protocols and Standard Operating Procedures for inspection decontamination and quarantine procedures,
- increasing number and location of inspection stations to fill current gaps,
- enhancing data collection and timely sharing with mobile devices,
- evaluating effectiveness of public education program to optimize messaging,
- increasing consistency of public education and outreach information with regional partners,
- reviewing and strengthening our rapid response efforts, including, county, state, and federal partners, Tribes, watershed groups, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's)
- exploring a passport system similar to Idaho, and
- staying abreast of new threats.

Step two: The agencies develop AIS budgets based on the above structural adjustments.

Step three: Continue building out to a regional effort.

Proposal: Explore a focused multistate/provincial effort between Idaho, Wyoming, Washington, Oregon, British Columbia and Alberta through involvement with various regional groups, including the Western Regional Panel and Mississippi Regional Panel for the Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force, and the 100th Meridian Initiative, and others. Consider developing MOAs among five northwestern states, and provinces of BC and Alberta to develop regional approach for AIS prevention and cost-sharing key inspection stations. (FWP, DNRC)

Proposal: Engage the Western Governor's Association. The WGA has a Policy Resolution (Combating Invasive Species, Policy Resolution 10-4) which should be revisited and strengthened, emphasizing importance of regional AIS coordination, especially regarding AIS prevention efforts. (Governor's Office).

Proposal: Engage the Northwest Power Planning Council (Governor's Office).

Step four: Actively engage the Federal Government on this issue.

Proposal: Work with the US Border Patrol to improve inspections/reporting at the border (FWP, Governor's Office).

Proposal: Pressure US Department of Interior to address the spread of invasive mussels on watercraft from infested waters in the lower Colorado watershed. Movement of Quagga mussels from Lake Mead, Lake Havasu and other infested waters are an immediate threat to the Pacific Northwest, and are

important AIS issues, although the risks to Montana are much broader in terms of species and geography (DNRC, Governor's Office, in cooperative effort with Idaho).

Proposal: Work with our Congressional Delegation on the above, and to build the case for additional federal funding (Governor's Office, DNRC, FWP).

Step five: Work with the University System to promote research on AIS prevention, detection and control. For example, expand research on developing effective control methods for flowering rush (Agriculture, FWP).

Step six: Create 1) a working group to oversee transition, and 2) an ad-hoc steering committee to oversee and monitor future progress/activities. The working group would be agency personnel to get us through the next 5 months, the ad-hoc steering committee would consist of agency, private, industry, angling, conservation, legislators(?) to review program strengths and weaknesses, identify opportunities for improving the program, act as a sounding board, and bring issues/concerns to the table for solutions.

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