

Under Pressure, Glacier Park Loosens Boating Restrictions

Park officials alter invasive species inspection program after directive from Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke

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Facing mounting pressure from Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, Glacier National Park officials have loosened restrictions barring motorized watercraft from the park's waters despite the recent arrival of invasive mussels in Montana, according to an internal memo obtained by the Beacon.

The apparent mandate has required park authorities to quickly craft a new inspection program and prompted concerns from a former Glacier superintendent and conservation groups about the rushed implementation.

According to the memo circulated among National Park Service employees late last month, Zinke issued a directive to the park's top brass, including Superintendent Jeff Mow, to "find ways for the taxpayers to be able to use their motorboats in our park waters" this summer.

According to a spokesperson for the Interior Department, Heather Swift, "the Secretary's directive was only for the internal landowners whose boats never leave the park."

Recipients of the memo included employees charged with managing the park's Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Inspection Program, and the author expressed dismay at having to unexpectedly rush a new inspection program online during the height of summer.

"I realize we don't even have all the kinks worked out of our non-motorized ops. yet and now we are looking at a whole new program, and I understand, sympathize, and share your frustration at yet another responsibility being added to your already very full plates," the park official states in the memo. "If I had been given a choice, or if Jeff Mow or [Chief Ranger] Paul Austin were given a choice, we would have opted for starting this next year, but that is not the reality. We're going to do the best we can with this and if it is any consolation, this could not have been placed in more capable hands than yours."

The decision reflects an about-face from the park's earlier move to prohibit the use of motorized boats this summer while allowing non-trailer, non-motorized vessels only after mandatory inspections. The abrupt policy change also begs the question as to why Zinke, a Whitefish native who grew up on the doorstep to Glacier, and who frequently touts the need for bottom-up, local decision-making practices, would interfere at the local level of management.

According to the memo, park administrators were considering the possibility of a motorized-access program in the future, but hadn't planned on rolling it out this summer.

In addition to allowing private landowners to access Lake McDonald, the park implemented a rigorous 30-day quarantine program for members of the boating public who wish to launch in park waters.

The sudden policy change comes at a time when Montana is implementing sweeping changes to its fight against aquatic invasive species after the 2017 Montana Legislature increased funding for the state's program to \$6 million annually.

Last November, Glacier Park officials immediately closed park waters to all watercraft following the discovery of destructive mussel larvae in Tiber and Canyon Ferry reservoirs east of the Continental Divide, just 100 air miles from the boundary of Glacier Park and the headwaters of the Columbia River Basin. It was the first such detection of the invasive species in the state's history, and pulled a dire scenario into grisly focus.

The quick response earned widespread praise but frustrated some boaters, and included an assessment period that involved testing, inspections and an evaluation of the risk that boats pose to park waters. That inspection period was expected to continue through the summer.

In May, park officials launched the second phase of the AIS Action Plan, re-opening park waters to non-motorized watercraft like kayaks and paddleboards but requiring mandatory inspections.

The third phase of the AIS Action Plan, announced July 10, will allow motorboats on Lake McDonald following an initial inspection and subsequent 30-day quarantine period during which each boat must be sealed and trailered. After the quarantine period ends and if the seal is still intact, boats can receive authorization to launch.

"Quarantining a cleaned, drained and dry boat for thirty days ensures that all invasive mussels and mussel larvae that may be missed during an inspection or decontamination process are dead," Superintendent Mow stated in a July 10 press release announcing the program. "Our objective is to provide an appropriate level of user access to the extent that we can, and ensure that those motorboats do not pose a risk to park waters."

The National Park Service referred all questions to the Department of Interior.

Swift stated in an email that she "can't track down answers to this mysterious memo" but said Zinke had a conversation with park officials in March about allowing internal landowners whose boats remain on park waters to access them. The conversation did not include discussions about opening the waters to members of the general public, she said.

"This is a common sense measure that is consistent with Montana's values of recreation and multiple use of public lands," she stated.

"The policy is similar to other local policies," she continued. "The Park implemented only an initial part of that Phase III response by allowing lakefront landowners to launch boats on Lake McDonald that have been dormant for the winter, following a rigorous, mandatory staff inspection."

The park's inclusion of the 30-day quarantine stipulation likely had to do with its mission to balance private and public uses, according to a source with knowledge of the decision-making process.

"The 30-day clean, drained and dry quarantine has demonstrated a very high degree of effectiveness in eliminating an AIS threat, much higher than inspection or decontamination," Mow wrote in an email.

An infestation of zebra or quagga mussels could spell the beginning of the end for Montana's most pristine watersheds, holding the potential to topple underwater food webs that prop up the Treasure State's prized aquatic species while wreaking untold havoc on its infrastructure and recreation economy.

As part of the third phase, the park has already begun allowing private landowners living within the park boundary around Lake McDonald, whose motorboats are exclusively launched there, to begin accessing the lake. Those boats have exceeded the 30-day quarantine requirement and undergone boat inspections, according to Mow.

The decision to open park waters to motorized boats during a period when the threat of invasive species has never been greater rankled members of the conservation community, as well as former park officials.

"They had a plan to minimize the risk, and the plan was to close all park waters to all motorized craft for this field season," said Chas Cartwright, a former Glacier Park superintendent and a leader in the fight against aquatic invasive species. "This is not the plan. I am flabbergasted that we would consider opening park waters now. This is a big deal and it poses a huge threat to world-class resources throughout the Crown of the Continent."

David Brooks, executive director of Montana Trout Unlimited, called the decision to open up park waters to some motorized craft "irresponsible."

"It's an open door to the Columbia River Basin that shouldn't be opened unless Glacier is fully staffed and has the resources necessary to inspect and decontaminate every boat," Brooks said. "If the Interior Department and Secretary Zinke are the one pressing on the Park Service to make this happen, then the Secretary ought to be putting additional funding to adequately prevent the spread of mussels, not cutting the park's budget."

The decision by top park officials also garnered sympathy, given that they apparently had little flexibility to maneuver under Zinke's mandate.

Chris Schustrom, chairman of Montana Trout Unlimited and a longtime Whitefish resident, said that while he shares Brooks' concerns, the inspection-and-quarantine program appears to be an effective tact, particularly given the time constraints park officials were forced to work within.

"I don't think the park had any choice in this decision," he said. "This certainly opens up new opportunities for aquatic invasive mussels to enter the Columbia River Basin. But given the short turnaround and the pressure the park was put under, I think they put together a pretty good plan. I think it could be effective. When I read it over, given the fact that they basically had their feet held to the fire on this, I have to applaud them."

Lauren Alley, a spokesperson for Glacier National Park, said officials had already begun designing a blueprint for motorized-boat access.

"We have been working on what this quarantine program might look like for a couple of months, and certainly the public has been interested in what opportunities lie ahead for motorized use," she said.

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Zinke must be hosting a party soon and want to put is boat in. Bets?
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Ron Fisher
GNP can raise some possible great funds...have signs made up saying if you are caught with the nasty little mussels in your watercraft/carrier....you will/can be fined up to \$500,000 dollars, lose you watercraft, lose the vehicle pulling boat/raft/canoe...etc. That would be a great way to scare any idiot and make them think twice. Up in AK...one can lose all that with hunting & fishing violations so why not for the Zebra critters.
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Cynthia Lee Wolf · Western New Mexico University
With all due respect, Ron. It really doesn't matter how much someone is fined, or what equipment they lose if they bring mussels to the park waters. Just look at the damage that non-native fish have caused and the cost of mitigating them.
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