

Pueblo Chieftain

Zebra mussel cousins pop up at Lake Granby

Quaggas are a closely related species to the zebra mussels found earlier this year in Lake Pueblo.

By Chris Woodka

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The zebra mussels believed to be breeding in Lake Pueblo now have company. Their cousins, invasive quagga mussels, have been identified at Lake Granby. Veligers, the larval stage of the quagga mussel, were found in Lake Granby earlier this month and genetically confirmed late last week. In January, zebra mussels were confirmed in Lake Pueblo.

The state responded by approving \$7.2 million in funds, after an emergency allocation of \$1 million, to attempt to contain zebra mussels in Lake Pueblo, a state park, with inspections, education and eventually cleaning stations. The mussels most commonly are moved from one lake to another by attaching themselves to boats.

The U. S. Forest Service oversees boating at Granby, and plans to use education to prevent the mussels from spreading into other parts of the state, said spokesman John Bustos.

"There are no restrictions, but we have a drain-and-dry education program in place," Bustos said. "There are no facilities for washing boats, but we are providing education at the boat landings."

At Lake Pueblo, additional rangers were added in April to provide inspections. So far, only one boat, being brought into the state from Michigan last month, has had zebra mussels attached to it. It was cleaned and later allowed into the water. However, it is the veligers, which are about the size of pepper and hard to positively identify, that cause concern for water officials.

"By the time you find the mussels, the population has exploded," said Terry Book, director of operations for the Pueblo Board of Water Works. "Finding the veligers is like looking for a needle in a haystack."

The state Division of Wildlife has been looking for zebra or quagga mussels since 2004, using substrate devices - basically pieces of pipe suspended on ropes - at most major lakes and waiting for shells to attach. That was how the presence of mussels was first detected at Lake Pueblo in November, and confirmed two months later after sampling veligers and DNA tests.

At Granby, a periodic sampling of larvae led to last week's discovery, said Kara Lamb, of the Bureau of Reclamation.

Lake Granby, completed in 1951 near the town of Granby on the Western Slope, is the largest lake in the Colorado-Big Thompson Project that serves Northern Colorado. Like Lake Pueblo, it is managed by Reclamation.

Reclamation has not found any more mussel shells in either lake, but provided divers and camera equipment to try to detect mussels at Lake Pueblo earlier this year. None were found.

Still, the agency is concerned.

"Public awareness and participation is the best weapon in the containment of invasive species," Lamb said. "We're closely working with our partners for public education."

Quagga mussels, slightly larger than zebra mussels, can live at deeper levels and breed in cooler temperatures. They were found in Lake Mead in 2007 and have already migrated downstream to other reservoirs and into canals. Zebra mussels also were found in a California reservoir earlier this year.

Colorado's response to prevent spreading mussels has varied depending on which agencies oversee boating operations.

State Parks' goal is containment at Lake Pueblo and inspections to prevent introduction from boats at other major lakes it oversees.

The Pueblo Board of Water Works has closed Clear Creek Reservoir until it develops an inspection process, a move similar to Denver Water, which closed Antero on May 1. Antero reopened last week under a new inspection plan developed between Denver Water and the Division of Wildlife.

At Blue Mesa Reservoir near Gunnison, the National Parks Service has taken a proactive approach to prevent introduction of either zebra or quagga mussels. Certification is based on reports from boat owners about where their boats were last and how long ago they were in the water.

If the boat is suspect, the Parks Service provides a hot water wash - a minimum temperature of 140 degrees Fahrenheit is required to kill the mussels - at no cost to the boat owner, said Matt Malick, aquatic ecologist.

“The goal is to prevent the spread of zebra and quagga mussels to Blue Mesa and other Western States,” Malick said. “If the boaters keep their boats clean, that’s half the battle.”