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Weeds ensnaring boats in marina

Plants grow faster than county can cut

By MIKE JOHNSON of the Journal Sentinel staff

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McKinley Marina is so awash in weeds and boats so tangled up in the slimy stuff that Milwaukee County officials on Wednesday said the harbor has become a "navigational hazard."

High temperatures and low Lake Michigan water levels have made the marina the perfect soupy mix the weeds need to thrive, said Greg Youngs, deputy director of the Milwaukee County Department of Parks, Recreation and Culture.

Although park employees have been working overtime to cut the weeds, they can't keep up, Youngs said.

"We can't stay with it. These weeds are just flourishing like crazy," he said. "We took 15 loads out of there. It's just like a needle in the haystack.

"We think it's a navigational problem. We know it is fouling engines and propellers. People could get stuck out there," Youngs said.

The county now hopes to turn to chemical warfare to beat back the weeds and is seeking permission from the state Department of Natural Resources to use a herbicide.

Quotable

"It's causing a lot of problems for our boaters. They have been very patient. Their patience is wearing thin."

- Greg Youngs, deputy director, Milwaukee County Department of Parks, Recreation and Culture

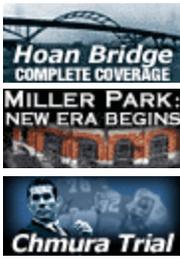
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"We're told this is a fast, effective product. Within a couple days, you could see the difference," Youngs said.

That would be good news for boaters who have seen the weeds jam propellers and clog engine intake valves - problems that can cost hundreds or thousands of dollars to fix.

"Boaters are hating life right now," said Mike Callahan of Milwaukee, who sails at the Milwaukee Yacht Club. "Every time you come into port, it's a problem."

Said yacht club dock master Dan Couillard: "It's a swamp. The weeds are probably growing twice as fast as I've ever seen them grow, and I've been here 16 years."

"It's like bales of hay down there. It's never been this bad, ever. It's 10 times worse than it's ever been. There are areas that are just pure weeds," he said.

During last weekend's Dain Rauscher Milwaukee Grand Prix yacht race, about half the 92 boats participating got stuck in the weed-clogged harbor and had to be towed free, Couillard said.

"Everybody's complaining," he said.

Youngs agrees. "It's causing a lot of problems for our boaters. They have been very patient. Their patience is wearing thin. . . . The complaints are just starting to build. The boaters are at their wits' end."

This is the second year in a row that the marina has suffered from a serious weed problem. Last year, boaters said the problem was the worst they had ever seen. Now they are saying this year's weed woes easily eclipse last year's.

The culprit weed last year was eurasian milfoil. To combat the problem, the county obtained a permit from the DNR and this year applied a chemical that inhibits milfoil growth. That \$10,000 solution worked on the milfoil, Youngs said.

But now a different weed, elodea, is causing the headaches as it grows out of control, Youngs said. County parks and DNR officials met earlier in the week to discuss the problem.

County parks officials want to modify the existing permit so they can quickly begin chemical treatments. But Craig Helker, a resource management specialist with the DNR, said the county will have to apply for a new permit to treat the weeds. The existing permit is only for the milfoil, he said.

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Youngs said he doesn't yet know how much it will cost to battle this weed.

In addition to the hot weather and low lake level, Youngs and others said zebra mussels are exacerbating the problem.

Zebra mussels eat tiny water organisms, making the water clearer. "The combination of low water and zebra mussels makes the water clarity super. The sun gets all the way to the bottom, creating a perfect breeding environment for the weeds," Couillard said.

On the bright side, Youngs said that he doesn't expect the weeds, which are in the marina and along the break wall, to stink up the marina area when they die and rot.

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