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**NATICK**

**Plans to rid Lake Cochituate of invasive weeds are failing.**

The Conservation Commission may call a regional meeting with state officials to develop a management plan for Lake Cochituate, which has experienced a 68 percent increase in invasive weed coverage over the past year.

The state's Department of Conservation and Recreation presented a quarterly report to the Natick Conservation Commission last week, which showed the problem is "getting worse," said Matthew Gardner, chairman of the local board.

"We are going to issue a call for a broader meeting that includes a number of different actors and experts from around the state to explore this problem," Gardner said. "We need to beat the bushes to come up with a management plan. We are now in the business of farming weeds."

In an interview last week, Anne Monnelly, acting director of the state department's Office for Water Resources, said a July survey indicated 133 acres of the 614-acres Lake Cochituate, made up of North, Middle and South ponds, were taken over by invasive plant species in July. Last August, only 79 acres of the lake was covered by the invasive Eurasian water milfoil, variable milfoil and to a lesser degree, curly pond weed.

"If you look at the uses for this lake, it's an incredibly valuable recreational resource," Monnelly said. "Both aesthetically and as a swimming resource, the quality has declined."

As cycles of invasive plant growth and die back go on, the lake moves along on a cycle of losing its native plant and animal species and potentially filling in, she said. In addition, swimmers, boaters and private property owners face a less inviting lake.

Last week, a state contractor was installing 18,000 square feet of benthic matting in front of the Cochituate State Park beach area and another 15,000 square feet by the boat ramp, Monnelly said. The screen-like, mesh fabric is held down on the bottom of the lake by cement blocks, stakes or steel rods during the winter to block sunlight and thwart growth of the invasive weeds, she said. It is kept in place through Memorial Day, because it can interfere with boating, fishing and swimming in the summer.

The state added the matting by the boat dock this year, to prevent the growth and transfer of invasive plants to other water bodies. Lake Cochituate is one of six lakes statewide where the department also pays a monitor to check boats before they enter the lake and when they leave to prevent the spread of lake weeds.

In addition to the above measures, the state has conducted hand pulling operations, which involves a scuba diver pulling weeds from their roots and carrying them out in mesh bags, Monnelly said. Other department officials wait in canoes above to grab weed fragments that might spread the plants.

The effort is time consuming, because it can create cloudiness in the water that makes the process impossible. Other methods involve a scuba diver using a vacuum to pull up weeds or a mechanical harvester sucking up weeds.

A Tufts University student is finishing up a report about how two SolarBee Inc. circulators, on loan from the North Dakota company, have worked to fight invasive weeds. The theory is that the circulators restrict the nitrogen that invasive plants need to live.

Preliminary results from the study indicate that the circulators did not work, according to Monnelly. However, there were four months last winter when the circulators were out of commission because they got caught in the ice. SolarBee has allowed the state to keep the machines for another year and the state will follow up on the Tufts student's study at the end of next summer, she said.

The state is also monitoring whether weevils used in other lakes to control invasive weeds will work. According to Monnelly, the state is concerned that the little weed-eating bugs may be an invasive species themselves.

What still remains unclear is whether the state will present an herbicide solution again. Natick's Conservation Commission and residents are opposed to the solution because the town gets water from the lake.

"We're not planning anything right now, but it was something we proposed initially because we did believe it would improve the situation and we still believe that," Monnelly said. "But the community support was not there."

As far as Gardner is concerned, "chemicals are off the table." He said the Conservation Commission is interested in trying the weevil option, reconsidering a mechanical harvester and waiting for the circulators to run their course another year.

"We will never be in a situation where the weeds don't exist," he said. "We need a management system to make the lakes as healthy as they can be."

Gardner said the idea for a broad meeting may gain momentum as early as January

***Footnote: Natick applied herbicides in June, 2014 after hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent on other methods. The Hopkinton Conservation Commission approved the use of herbicides in Lake Maspenock and Lake Whitehall. A town meeting article was amended by some “concerned citizens” to not include herbicides for the weed control of Lake Maspenock. It was voted and herbicides, at this time, will not be used for Lake Maspenock in 2015. However, the Conservation Commission had also approved the use of herbicides for Lake Whitehall, and because it will be funded by the State, the application of the herbicides will go on as scheduled for this reservoir.***