

Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District



2020 Watercraft Inspection Program Yearend Report



December 8, 2020

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2020 Watercraft Inspection Summary Infographic

Introduction

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources's (DNR) Watercraft Inspection Program is a state-wide program that was first created in 1992. From the beginning, the DNR's goal for the program was "To prevent the spread of invasive species within Minnesota through boater education, watercraft inspections and watercraft decontaminations at public water accesses". In 2011, legislation was signed into law that allowed watercraft inspectors to visually and tactically inspect water related equipment, decontaminate water-related equipment, prohibit access to boaters that refuse inspection or fail to remove contaminants (ex. plants, animals, mud, and water), and require watercrafts be decontaminated prior to launching into Minnesota waters. While the DNR hires its own watercraft inspectors for the program, most inspectors in the state are hired and paid for by watershed districts, conservation districts, lake associations, lake improvement districts, and many other organizations. In total, organizations across the state performed over 708,800 watercraft inspections in 2020.

To implement the watercraft inspection program in 2020, the Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District (CLFLWD) entered into a Joint Powers Agreement with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for authority to conduct boat launch inspections. The District continued its multi-year partnership with Chisago County to hire, train, and oversee inspectors. Through this partnership, Chisago County managed payroll and human resources for inspectors and received reimbursement from the CLFLWD for hours worked within the District. Chisago County inspectors were stationed at public lake accesses within the CLFLWD (which covers portions of Washington and Chisago counties) as well as throughout the remainder of Chisago County. Additionally, the CLFLWD directly hired several of its own inspectors in order to increase presence at boat launches on weekends and holidays.

There are five public lake accesses within CLFLWD, and inspectors were stationed at each one throughout the summer. Public accesses include one at Bone Lake, one at Comfort Lake, and three at Forest Lake: Forest 1 (located on the west basin at Lakeside Park), Forest 2 (located on the middle basin near Willow Point), and Forest 3 (located on the east basin and in some cases referred to as Hagberg). Hours worked by inspectors at each access is largely dependent upon funding and boater traffic. As such, the Forest Lake 1 access is the most worked public access within the District.

Watercraft at the District's 5 public accesses were inspected by either a Level 1 inspector or a Level 2 inspector. Both Level 1 and Level 2 inspectors are trained by the DNR and perform visual inspections as well as verbal boater surveys. In addition, Level 2 inspectors are qualified to operate a decontamination unit. This involves using a high-pressure, high-heat spraying machine to remove plants, animals such as mussels, and other potential contaminants from watercraft. Chisago County operates a decontamination unit which rotates between 14 accesses throughout CLFLWD and Chisago County including Forest 1, Forest 3, Comfort Lake, and Bone Lake. The DNR also operates a decontamination unit which rotates between Forest 1 and other accesses throughout the East Metro. Level 1 inspectors are not permitted to operate the decontamination unit, and instead solely complete the visual inspections of the watercraft and verbal boater surveys.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the State's watercraft inspection trainings were moved online last minute which caused some delays in the season's start date. Despite early difficulties, the

CLFLWD managed to begin their inspection season on May 16th, 2020. From a sizable applicant pool, the District hired 8 inspectors of its own and retained them for most of the season. With this many watercraft inspectors the District was able to provide great coverage at all public accesses throughout the summer months. For the health and safety of both staff and boat launch visitors, all District inspectors were provided with and required to wear a face mask while performing inspections in addition to periodically cleaning and sanitizing equipment with provide sanitizer. Pairing great inspector coverage with increased boat traffic resulted in the CLFLWD completing 10,363 surveys, the highest number of inspections in a single season (previous record was 8,240 surveys in 2017). Additionally, the inspection rate set a new District high at an average of 2.83 inspections per hour due prioritized scheduling. This level of boater interaction allowed inspectors to stop and clean 226 contaminated boats before entering a District Lake and educate thousands of other boaters.

Funding and Goals

Funding for the CLFLWD’s watercraft inspection program was provided by multiple sources including the Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Aid Program for both Washington and Chisago counties, local municipalities, and local interest groups such as lake associations and the Lions Club. Figure 1 illustrates financial contributions to the 2020 watercraft inspection program. Note that certain organizations opted to allocate funding to specific waterbodies (e.g. Bone Lake Association’s donations allocated to Bone Lake).

2020 Watercraft Inspection Program Estimated Funds per Lake



Figure 1. Financial contributions for 2020 watercraft inspection program

In order to set goals and determine hiring needs, estimated financial contributions were converted to inspection hours using an average hourly billing rate. For level 1 and 2 inspectors, the billing rate was \$22/hour. Figure 2 illustrates the estimated number of hours each financial contribution would cover.

2020 Watercraft Inspection Program Funded Hours

(Budget converted to hours based on \$22/hr hourly billing rate)

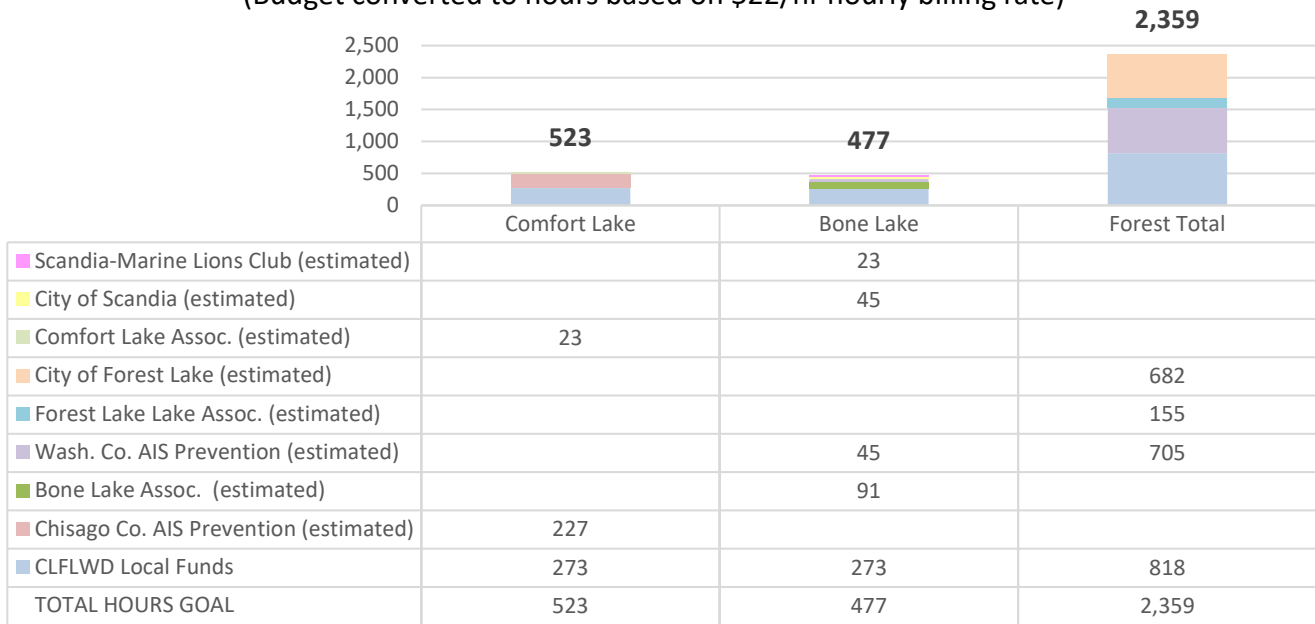


Figure 2. Funded inspection hours for 2020 watercraft inspection program

With the available funding, this year the District was able to hire a total of 14 inspectors to perform watercraft inspections at District accesses. Some inspectors were hired through the Chisago County joint program (6 staff), and others were hired directly by CLFLWD (8 staff).

Results

District-Wide

Inspection Hours and Scheduling

District-wide, watercraft inspectors performed **10,363 inspections and worked 3,679.8 hours** in 2020. Inspectors averaged a rate of **2.82 inspections per hour**. Figure 3 summarizes the total number of inspection hours and inspections completed District-wide over the last seven seasons.

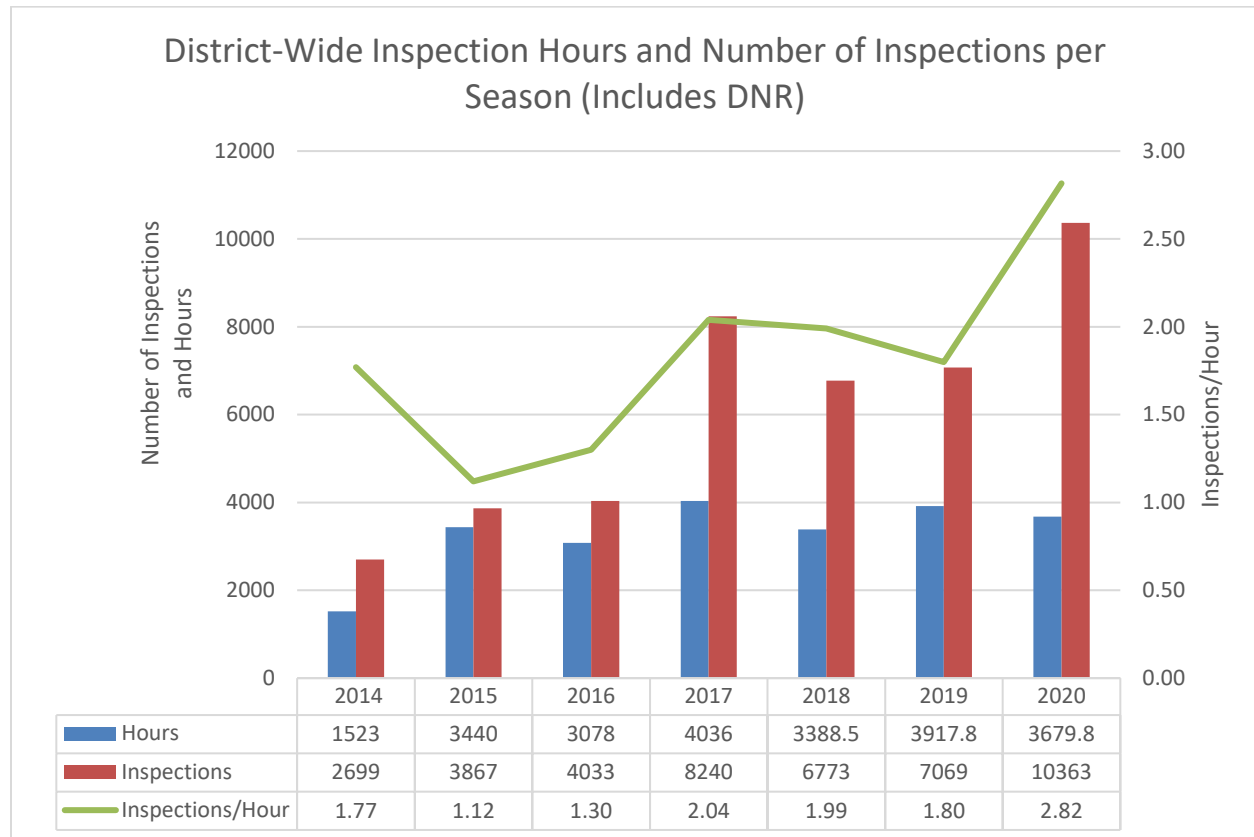


Figure 3. District-wide inspections and hours per season

Though inspection hours were slightly down in 2020 (3679.9 hours), as compared to 2019 (3917.8 hours), there was 3,294 more inspection surveys conducted in 2020. Not only were 10,363 inspections the highest in the CLFLWD’s history of the program, but the District also had its highest inspection rate of 2.82 inspections per hour. For comparison, the previous record for inspections was 8,240 surveys with an inspection rate of 2.04 in 2017.

As a planning tool to meet inspection hour goals, District staff take the number of funded inspections hours and divide it by the number of weeks in the watercraft inspection season. This calculation generates an average number of hours to work per week to use all funded hours by the end of the season. The goal number of hours per week of 135 was met by week 4 and was sustained until week 21 when many inspectors returned to school and other obligations. The number of inspections, and inspection hours by week throughout the season, as well as the rate of inspections/hour, and the hours/week goal can be found in Figure 4 . The spikes in inspections/hour that can be seen in the graph are generally attributed to holidays or seasonal changes (e.g. week four includes Memorial Day and week nine includes the Fourth of July).

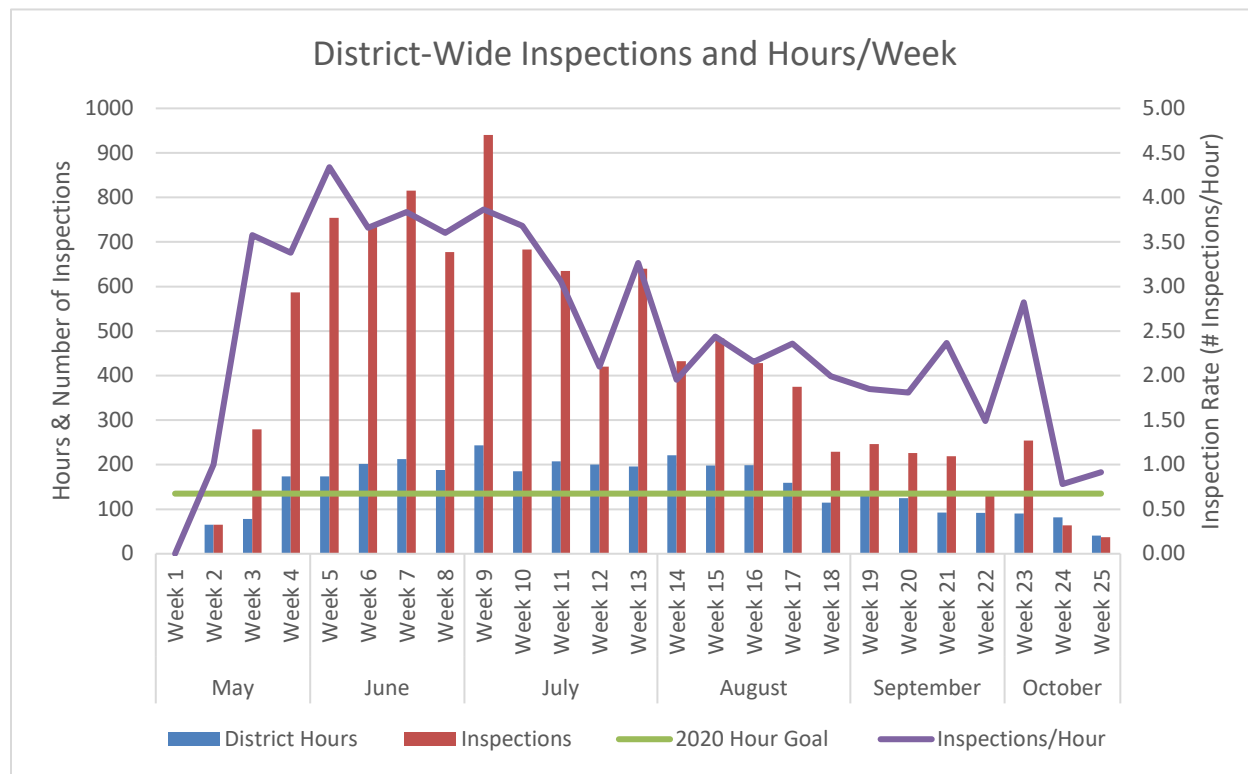


Figure 4. District-wide inspections, hours, rates, and goals

To maximize cost effectiveness and inspection numbers, weekend hours are prioritized for conducting watercraft inspections due to the general higher level of activity. As a result, 74% of hours and 84% of inspections occurred Friday through Sunday. Inspection hours worked during the week (Monday – Thursday) are typically performed by Chisago’s and the DNR’s inspectors. Figure 5 shows the number of inspections and hours per day for the 2020 season.

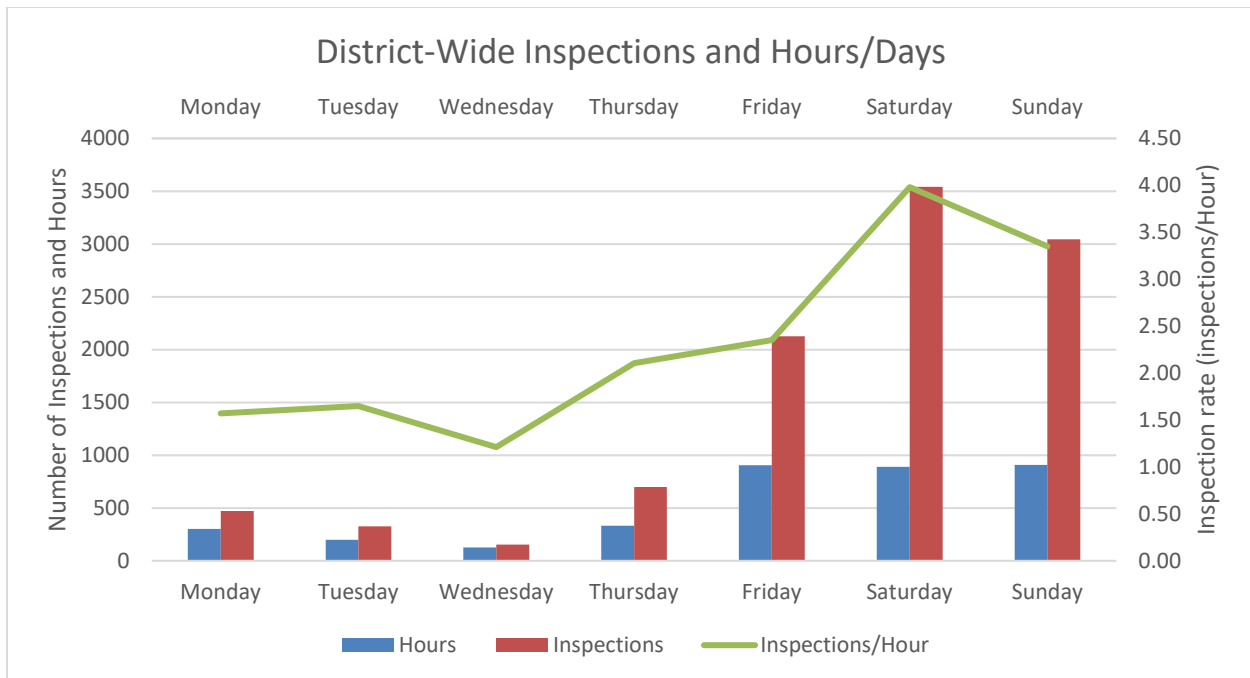


Figure 5. District-wide inspections and hours per day for the 2020 season

Survey Results

In addition to a watercraft inspector's responsibility to thoroughly inspect watercrafts for AIS and other contaminants, they are also required to complete an inspection survey for each boat that enters or exits a lake. Completed surveys are uploaded to the DNR's state-wide inspection survey database where program coordinators across the state can view the data. Important information such as number of boats entering and exiting a lake, incoming boat AIS violations, and new AIS infestation risk assessment can be calculated. In 2020, a total of 10,363 watercraft inspection surveys were performed on District lakes. Below are some findings from the inspection survey data. A summary of this information can be found in Figure 6.

- **148 watercrafts arrived at District lakes with contaminants such as plants, animals, mud, or water on their equipment.** This number was 122 in 2019, 140 in 2018, 213 in 2017, 41 in 2016 and 39 in 2015. Note that transportation of *any* plants or animals on watercraft, not just invasive species, is prohibited. These watercrafts were cleaned off and/or drained prior to launching. If vegetation or mud could not be removed by hand, watercraft were denied launch.
- **83 watercraft required removal of the bilge drainage plug** upon arriving at District lakes. This number was 85 in 2019, 115 in 2018, 115 in 2017, 19 in 2016 and 67 in 2015. After educating the watercraft user on the potential of AIS in their bilge water, bilge plugs were removed from the watercraft and all water was drained prior to the watercraft launching in an area that would not flow into the lake.

- **1462 watercraft exited District lakes with contaminants such as plants, animals, mud, or water present.** This number was 867 in 2019, 931 in 2018, 804 in 2017, 187 in 2016 and 260 in 2015. Note that transportation of *any* plants or animals on watercraft, not just invasive species, is prohibited. All contaminants were removed from the watercraft and trailer before departing from the lake.

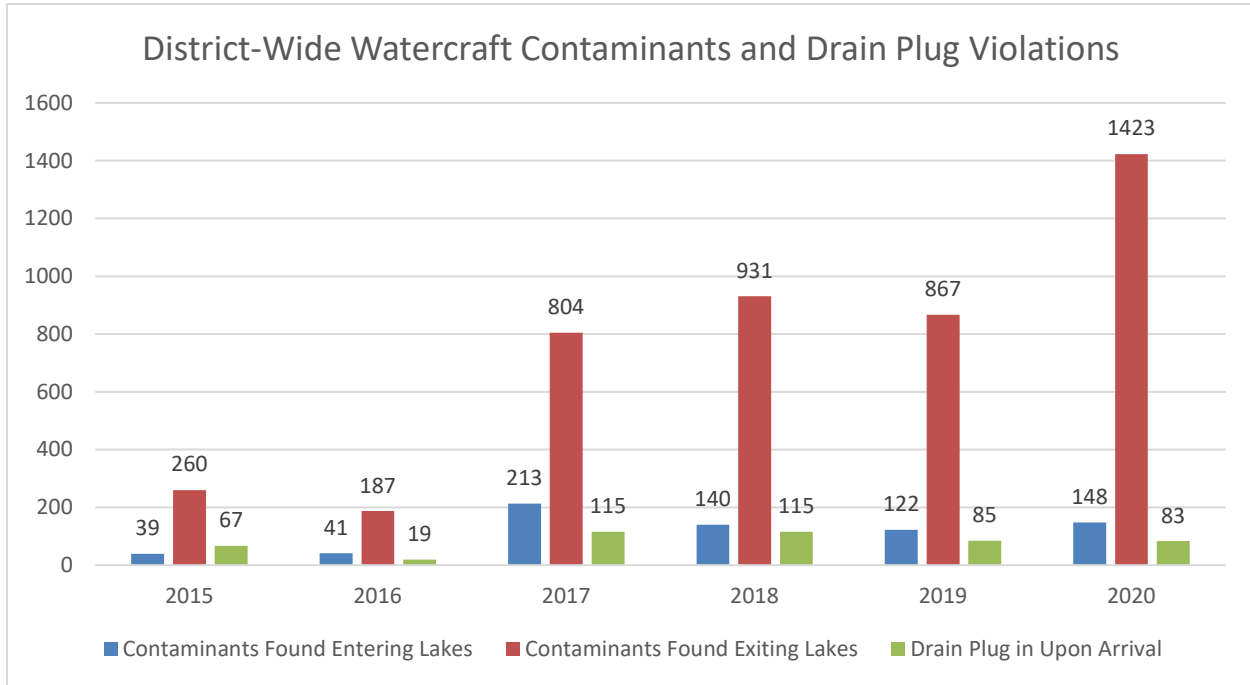


Figure 6. District-wide watercraft contaminants and drain plug violations as reported over the last six seasons. Contaminants include plants, animals, mud, and water.

Included in the inspection survey are questions regarding the waterbody most likely to be visited next by the boater. Many of the lakes that boaters intend to visit after leaving a District lake do not have all the same AIS present in them. This information stresses the importance of not just preventing AIS from entering District lakes but also preventing AIS from leaving them. Results of this aspect of the survey can be found in Figure 6. In 2021, the District will work to reduce the number of exiting violations from the 1423 violations that were recorded in 2020.

Next Waterbody Boaters Intend to Visit after Leaving a District Lake				
Waterbody	Eurasian Watermilfoil	Zebra Mussels	Flowering Rush	Spiny Waterflea
St. Croix River	EWM	ZM	X	SW
Coon	EWM	X	X	X
White Bear	EWM	ZM	X	X
Big Marine	EWM	X	X	X
Green	EWM	X	X	X
Minnetonka	EWM	ZM	FR	X
Bald Eagle	EWM	ZM	FR	X
Mille Lacs	EWM	ZM	X	SW
Chisago	EWM	X	X	X
Centerville	EWM	X	X	X

Figure 7. Top 10 lakes boaters intended to visit after leaving a District lake in 2020

Risk of New Invasive Species

Unfortunately, many CLFLWD lakes are home to a number of aquatic invasive species such as curly-leaf pondweed, Eurasian watermilfoil, flowering rush, zebra mussels, and several others. Species such as these are a concern to the District as they have the ability to cause ecological, recreational, economic, and physical harm. While the District manages many of the aquatic invasive species present in its lakes, it is still widely known that the most effective management strategy is prevention. There are still many species that are not yet in District lakes and one of the main goals of the CLFLWD watercraft inspection program is to prevent their introduction.

Starry stonewort and the spiny water flea are two examples of aquatic invasive species found in Minnesota that are not yet in District lakes. Starry stonewort is an invasive algae that forms dense mats in lakes that impede boating and prevent the establishment of beneficial native plants. Starry stonewort was discovered in Lake Koronis near Paynesville, MN in 2015 and has since been discovered in 15 additional lakes across the state. In 2020, one new lake was added to the DNR’s infested waters list for starry stonewort, Carnelian Lake in Stearns County.

The spiny water flea is an invasive species of zooplankton which is about the size of a grain of rice that competes with small fish for the same food resource (other zooplankton). The spiny water flea was first discovered in Lake Superior in the early-1980s and has since spread to more than 66 inland lakes in Minnesota including: Mille Lacs Lake, Lake Vermilion, Lake of the Woods, and others.

Both invasive species are thought to be transported primarily by recreational watercraft. Figure 8. contains photos of spiny water flea and starry stonewort.



Figure 8. Spiny water flea (left) and starry stonewort (right). Source: MNDNR.

Part of the watercraft inspection survey involves asking the boaters which lake they visited last. The boaters' responses can be cross referenced with records that the DNR keeps of infested waters. This is a way to estimate the risk of these species spreading to District lakes. Note that transportation of water or *any* plants or animals on watercraft, not just invasive species, is prohibited. District watercraft inspectors required that these watercrafts be cleaned off, decontaminated and/or drained prior to launching into the lake.

- **158 boats launching into District lakes came from lakes infested with spiny water flea.** This number was 111 in 2019, 104 in 2018, 171 in 2017, and 231 in 2016.
- **30 boats launching into District lakes came from lakes infested with starry stonewort.** This number was 22 in 2019, 61 in 2018, 14 in 2017, and 83 in 2016.
- **In 2020, 2 boat came from a lake infested with brittle naiad, 12 came from a lake with New Zealand mudsnail, 65 from a faucet snail infested lake, and 12 from a lake with the VHS virus.**

Number of entering watercrafts that were last in an AIS infested waterbody						
	Comfort	Bone	Forest 1	Forest 2	Forest 3	Grand Total - All Lakes
Starry Stonewort	1	2	19	4	4	30
Spiny Waterflea	13	14	69	9	53	158
Zebra Mussels	45	56	400	43	215	759
Flowering Rush	8	12	111	14	60	205
Brittle Naiad	0	0	0	1	1	2
Grass Carp	8	15	63	7	47	140
Silver Carp	9	18	64	7	51	149
Big Head Carp	9	18	64	7	51	149
New Zealand Mudsnaill	2	2	6	0	2	12
Round Goby	2	2	6	0	2	12
White Perch	2	2	6	0	2	12
VHS	2	2	6	0	2	12
Ruffe	2	2	6	0	2	12
Faucet Snail	4	5	40	3	13	65
Eurasian Watermilfoil	153	175	831	81	452	1692

Figure 9. The number of watercrafts entering District lakes that were last in an AIS infested lake. These figures are likely a slight underestimation as a substantial number of inspections did not include enough information to determine which waterbodies boaters were last in.

Bone Lake

Inspection Hours and Scheduling

This season, watercraft inspectors performed **547.5 hours of inspections** on Bone Lake which resulted in **1049 inspections and associated surveys**. Inspectors averaged **1.92 inspections per hour**. While this is a reduction of 27.8 hours from 2019, inspectors saw an increase of 360 inspections in 2020 from the previous year. Figure 10. below summarizes the total number of inspection hours and inspections conducted on Bone Lake over the last seven seasons.

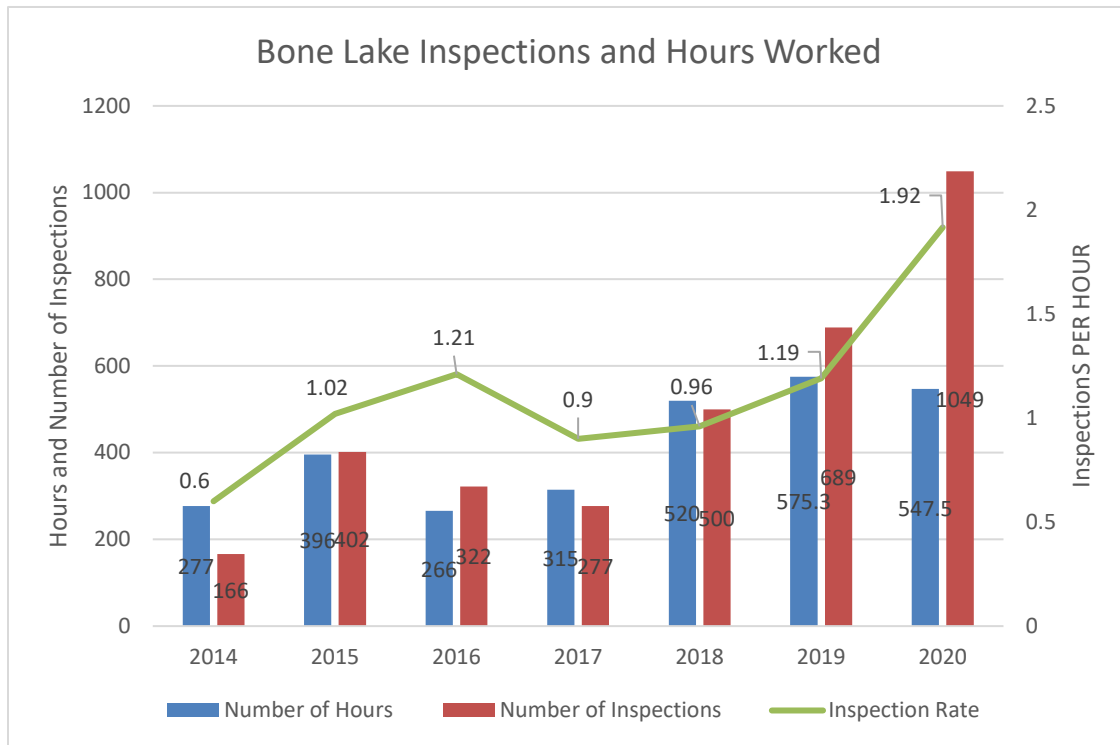


Figure 10. Summary of the total number of inspection hours, number of surveys, and inspection rates for Bone Lake over the last seven seasons.

Survey Results

A total of 1049 surveys were performed on Bone Lake this season. Findings and a summary of the results from the compiled inspection survey data for Bone Lake can be found below and in Figure 10:

- **3 watercraft arrived at Bone Lake with plants, animals, mud, or water on their watercraft.** This number was 7 in 2019, 16 in 2018, 11 in 2017, 1 in 2016 and 4 in 2015. Note that transportation of *any* plants or animals on watercraft, not just invasive species, is prohibited. These watercraft were cleaned off and/or drained prior to launching into Bone Lake.

- **12 watercraft required removal of the bilge drainage plug upon arriving at Bone Lake.** This number was 12 in 2019, 8 in 2018, 1 in 2017, 2 in 2016 and 6 in 2015. After educating the watercraft user on the potential of AIS in their bilge water, bilge plugs were removed from the watercraft and all water was drained prior to the watercraft launching in an area that would not flow into the lake.
- **47 watercraft exited Bone Lake with plants, animals, mud, or water present.** This number was 50 in 2019, 70 in 2018, 59 in 2017, 7 in 2016 and 24 in 2015. Note that transportation of *any* plants or animals on watercraft, not just invasive species, is prohibited. All contaminants were removed from the watercraft and trailer before departing from Bone Lake.

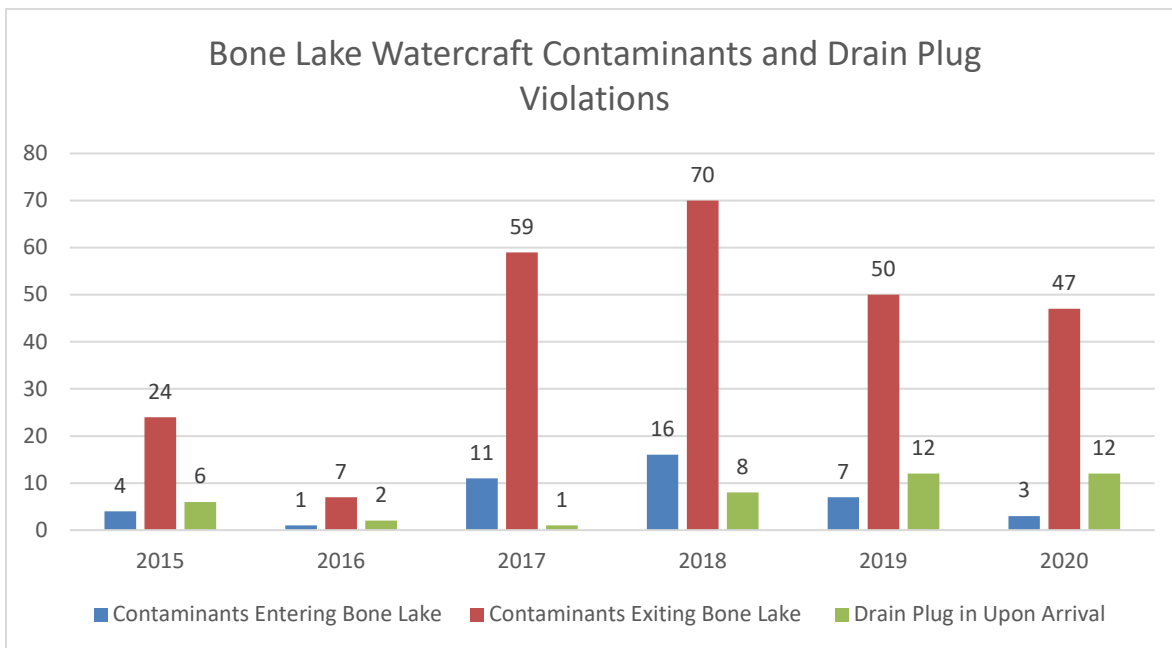


Figure 11. Bone Lake watercraft contaminants (ex. plants, animals, mud, and water) and drain plug violations reported over the last six seasons.

Risk of New Invasive Species

Part of the inspection survey involves asking the boaters which lake they visited last. The boaters’ responses can be cross referenced with records that the DNR keeps of infested waters. This is a way to estimate the risk of these species spreading to Bone Lake. Note that any watercraft with contaminants such as plants or standing water are required to be decontaminated prior to launch.

- **14 boats launching into Bone Lake came from lakes infested with spiny water flea.** For comparison, this number was 7 in 2019, 2 in 2018, 5 in 2017, and 25 in 2016.
- **2 boats launching into Bone Lake came from lakes infested with starry stonewort.** This number was 3 in 2019, 3 in 2018, 0 in 2017, and 2 in 2016.

Forest Lake

Inspection Hours and Scheduling

This season, CLFLWD watercraft inspectors performed 2,172.3 hours of inspections, and DNR inspectors performed 600 hours, totaling **2,594.5 total hours of inspections on the three Forest Lake public accesses**. During this time, CLFLWD inspected 6,820 watercraft and the DNR inspected 1271 watercraft, totaling **8,093 inspections and associated surveys**. Together, CLFLWD and DNR inspectors averaged **3.12 inspections per hour**. A summary of this information is presented in Figure 12. and Tables 1 – 3.

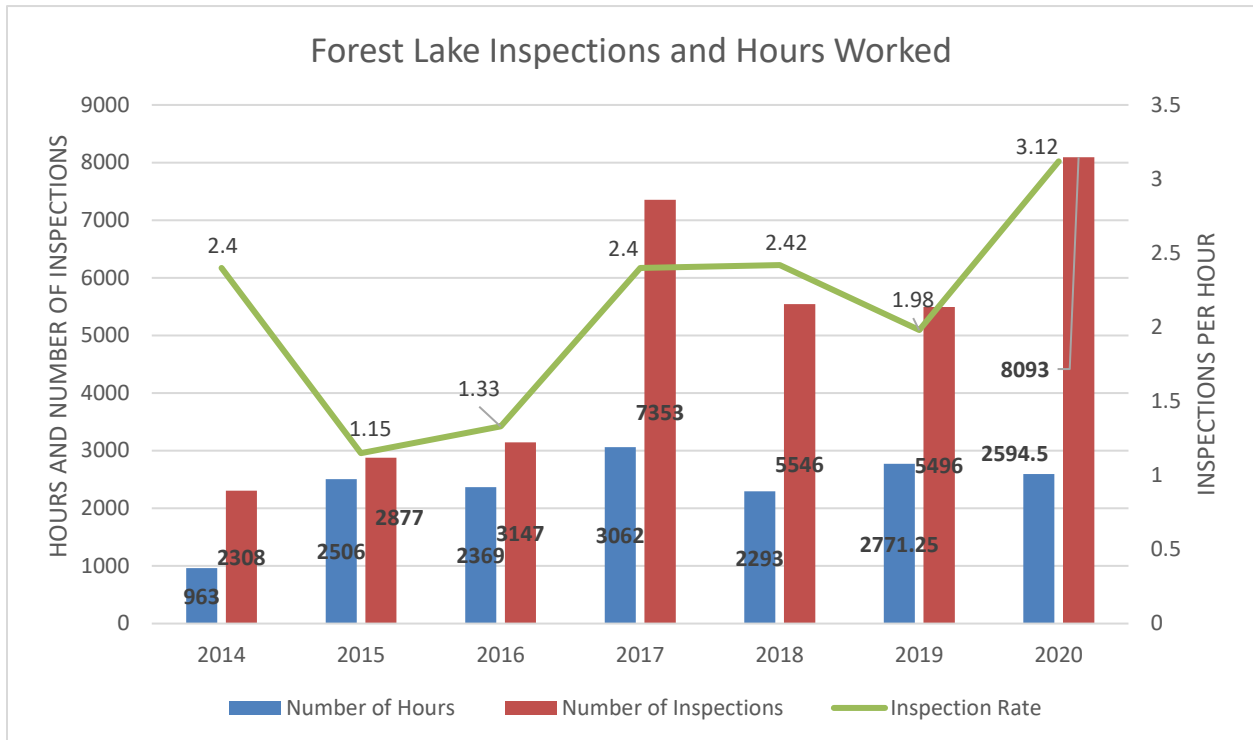


Figure 12. summary of inspections hours, number of surveys, and inspection rates over the last seven seasons at all three Forest Lake public boat launches.

Table 1. Forest Lake inspection hours

	Forest 1 (West or Lakeside Park)	Forest 2 (Middle or Willow Point)	Forest 3 (East or Hagberg)	Total
CLFLWD Inspection Hours	959.5	500.5	854.5	2,315
DNR Inspection Hours	280	-	-	280
Total Inspection Hours	1,239.5	500.5	854.5	2,594.5

Table 2. Forest Lake number of inspections

	Forest 1 (West or Lakeside Park)	Forest 2 (Middle or Willow Point)	Forest 3 (East or Hagberg)	Total
CLFLWD Inspections	3,413	870	2,537	6,820
DNR Inspections	1,271	2	0	1,273
Total Inspections	4,684	872	2,537	8,093

Table 3. Forest Lake inspection rate (inspections/hour)

	Forest 1 (West or Lakeside Park)	Forest 2 (Middle or Willow Point)	Forest 3 (East or Hagberg)	Average
CLFLWD Inspection Rate	3.56	1.74	2.97	2.76
DNR Inspection Rate	4.54	-	-	4.54
Average Inspection Rate	4.05	1.74	2.97	3.65

Survey Results

A total of 8,093 surveys were performed on Forest Lake this season. Findings and a summary of the results from the compiled inspection survey data for Forest Lake can be found below and in Figure 13. Below are some findings from the inspection survey data:

- **132 watercraft arrived at Forest Lake with plants, animals, mud, or water on their watercraft.** This number was 87 in 2019, 117 in 2018, 177 in 2017, 32 in 2016, and 32 in 2015. Note that transportation of *any* plants or animals on watercraft, not just invasive species, is prohibited. These watercraft were cleaned off and/or drained prior to launching into Forest Lake. It is against state law to launch a contaminated watercraft at a MN lake, regardless of known current infestations of that lake.
- **62 watercraft required removal of the bilge drainage plug upon arriving at Forest Lake.** This number was 65 in 2019, 92 in 2018, 110 in 2017, 15 in 2016, and 54 in 2015. After educating the watercraft user on the potential of AIS (e.g. microscopic zebra mussel larvae) in their bilge water, bilge plugs were removed from the watercraft and all water was drained prior to the watercraft launching in an area that would not flow into the lake.

- **1191 watercraft exited Forest Lake with plants, animals, mud, or water present.** This number was 762 in 2019, 817 in 2018, 670 in 2017, 158 in 2016, and 229 in 2015. Note that transportation of *any* plants or animals on watercraft, not just invasive species, is prohibited. All contaminants were removed from the watercraft and trailer before departing from Forest Lake.

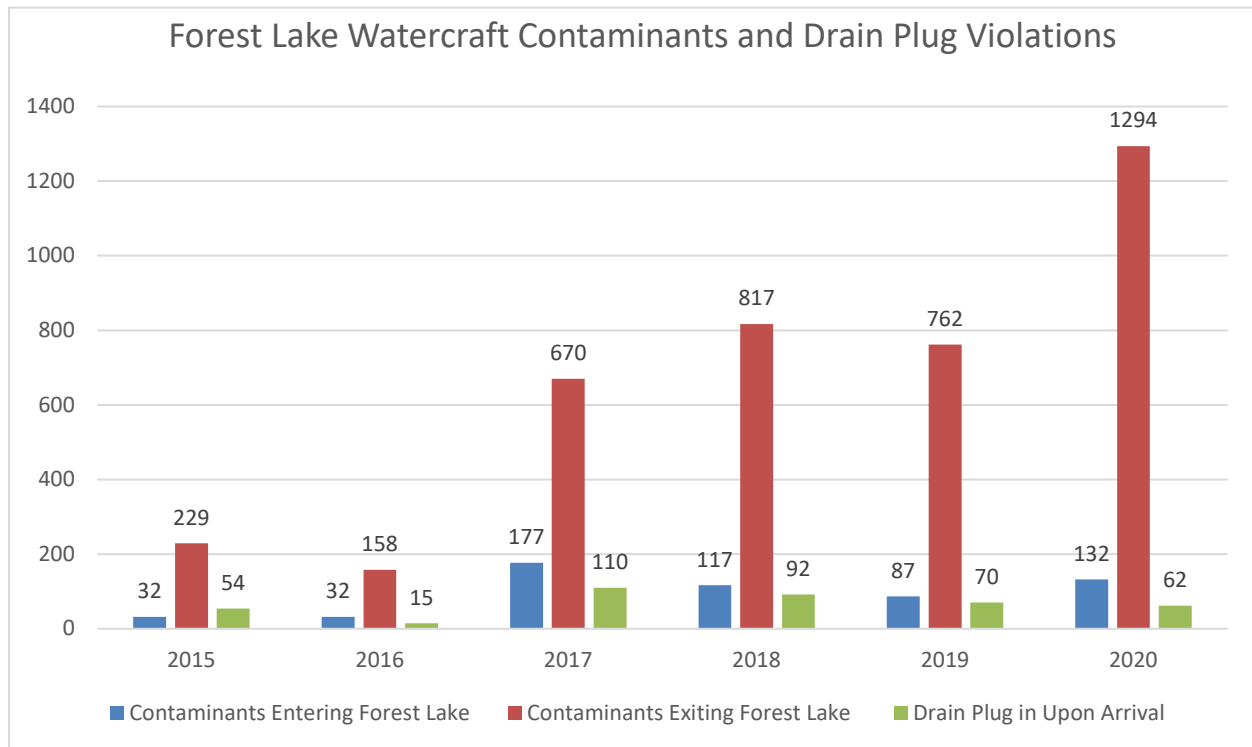


Figure 11. Forest Lake watercraft contaminants and drain plug violations as reported at Forest Lake accesses over the last six seasons

Risk of New Invasive Species

Part of the inspection survey involves asking the boaters which lake they visited last. The boaters’ responses can be cross referenced with records that the DNR keeps of infested waters. This is a way to estimate the risk of these species spreading to Forest Lake. Note that any watercraft with contaminants such as plants or standing water are required to be decontaminated prior to launch.

- **131 boats launching into Forest Lake came from lakes infested with spiny water flea.** This number was 92 in 2019, 101 in 2018, 153 in 2017, and 183 in 2016.
- **27 boats launching into Forest Lake came from lakes infested with starry stonewort.** This number was 18 in 2019, 53 in 2018, 12 in 2017 and 74 in 2016.

Comfort Lake

Inspection Hours and Scheduling

This summer, watercraft inspectors performed **527.5 hours of inspections** on Comfort Lake which resulted in **1221 inspections and associated surveys**. Inspectors averaged **2.27 inspections per hour**. A summary of this information is presented in Figure 12.

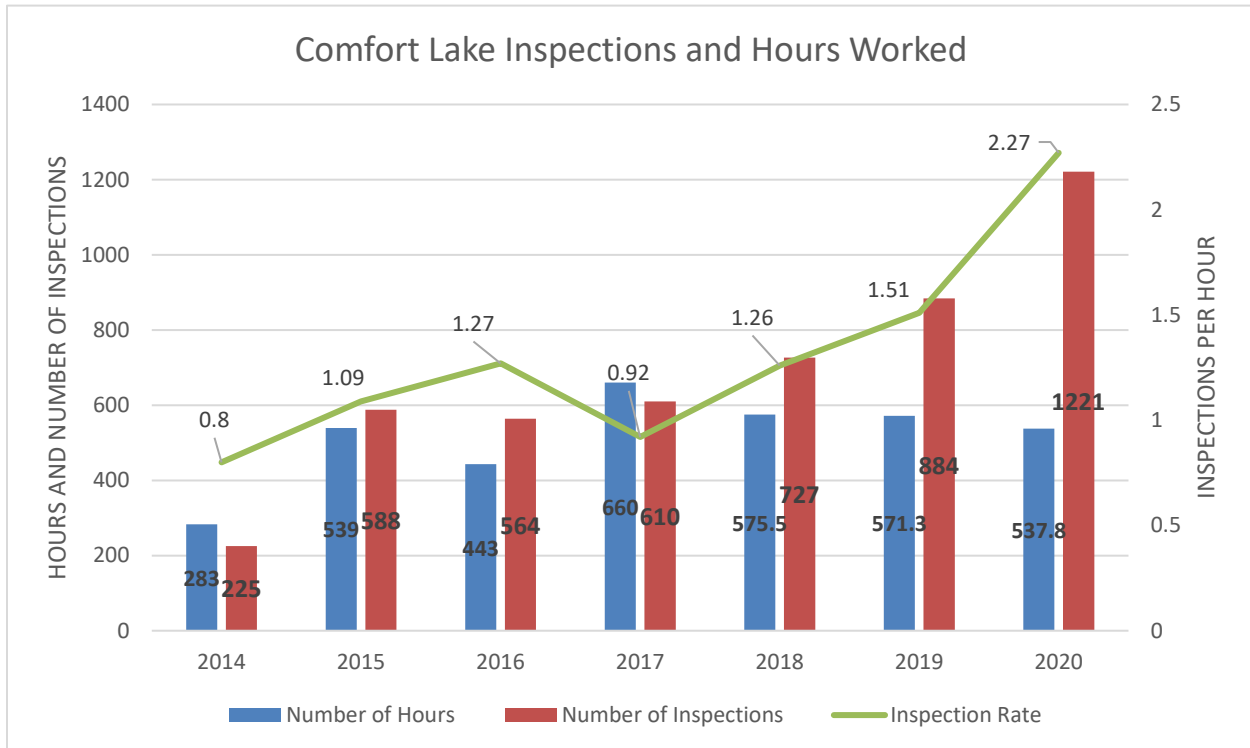


Figure 14. Summary of the inspection hours, number of surveys, and inspection rates completed on Comfort Lake over the last seven seasons.

Survey Results

A total of 1221 surveys were performed on Comfort Lake this season. Findings and a summary of the results from the compiled inspection survey data for Comfort Lake can be found below and in Figure 13.

- **13 watercraft arrived at Comfort Lake with plants, animals, mud, or water on their watercraft.** This number was 28 in 2019, 7 in 2018, 25 in 2017, 8 in 2016, and 3 in 2015. Note that transportation of *any* plants or animals on watercraft, not just invasive species, is prohibited. These watercraft were cleaned off and/or drained prior to launching into Comfort Lake.
- **9 watercraft required removal of the bilge drainage plug upon arriving at Comfort Lake.** This number was 8 in 2019, 15 in 2018, 4 in 2017, 2 in 2016 and 7 in 2015. After

educating the watercraft user on the potential of AIS in their bilge water, bilge plugs were removed from the watercraft and all water was drained prior to the watercraft launching in an area that would not flow into the lake.

- **82 watercraft exited Comfort Lake with plants, animals, mud, or water present.** This number was 55 in 2019, 44 in 2018, 75 in 2017, 22 in 2016 and 7 in 2015. Note that transportation of *any* plants or animals on watercraft, not just invasive species, is prohibited. All contaminants were removed from the watercraft and trailer before departing from Comfort Lake.

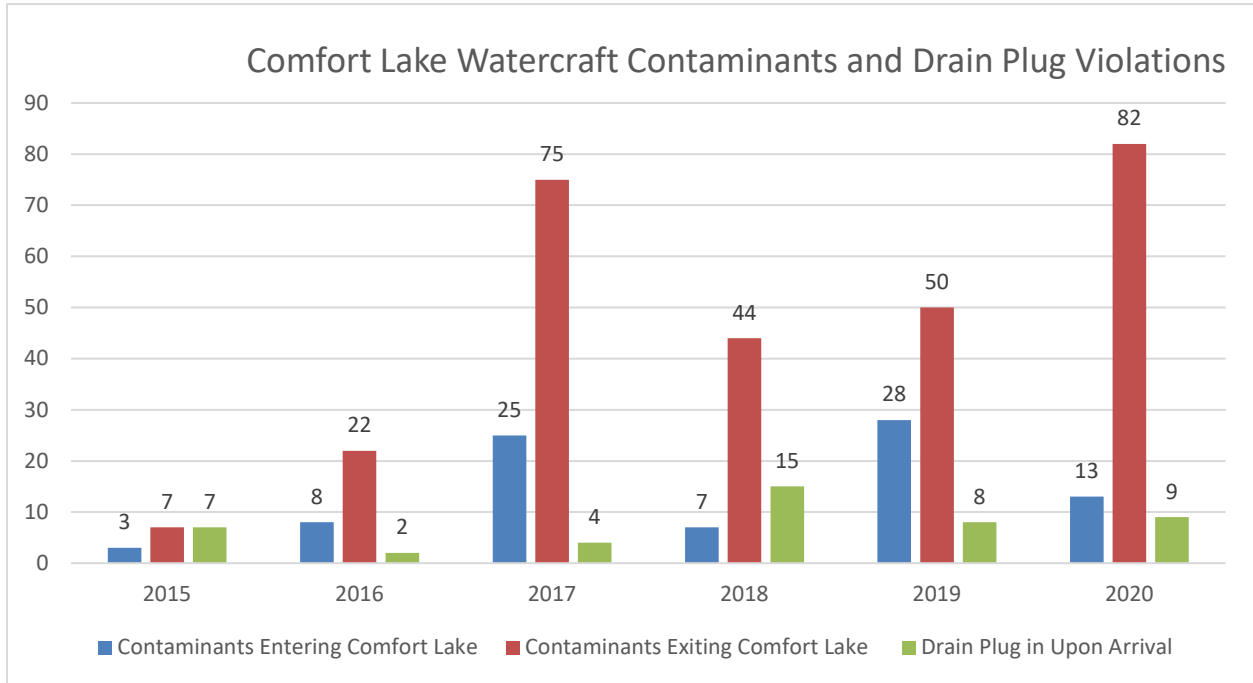


Figure 15. Comfort Lake watercraft contaminants and drain plug violations as reported at Comfort Lake over the last six seasons

Risk of New Invasive Species

Part of the inspection survey involves asking the boaters which lake they visited last. The boaters' responses can be cross referenced with records that the DNR keeps of infested waters. This is a way to estimate the risk of these species spreading to Comfort Lake. Note that any watercraft with contaminants such as plants or standing water are required to be decontaminated prior to launch.

- **13 boats launching into Comfort Lake** came from lakes infested with **spiny water flea**. For comparison, this number was 12 in 2019, 7 in 2018, 13 in 2017, and 24 in 2016.
- **1 boat launching into Comfort Lake** came from lakes infested with **starry stonewort**. This number was 1 in 2019, 5 in 2018, 2 in 2017 and 7 in 2016.

Discussion and Conclusion

In 2020, the CLFLWD’s watercraft inspection program saw a significant increase in boater traffic. In fact, more inspection surveys were conducted on District lakes than any other year (10,363 survey in 2020 compared to 8249 surveys in 2017). Not only was this due to prioritized scheduling, but likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic as well. As businesses and restaurants experienced restrictions and closures recreational boating and fishing increased. Fortunately, despite increased boater traffic the survey data indicated a lower percentage of entering boat violations with AIS contaminants (2.2%) compared to the average of the last 5 seasons (3.8%). However, AIS violations of boats exiting District lakes remained high at (13.7%), most of which are watercrafts leaving Forest Lake. While the District supplies its inspectors with rakes to clear plant debris from the public accesses, it is nearly impossible to keep accesses completely clean as Forest Lake is known for its abundant plant growth. This stresses the importance of scheduling inspectors at Forest Lake accesses to prevent exiting contaminants from leaving boat launches and traveling to other waterbodies.

As is the case with most watercraft inspection seasons, there are many lessons learned to continue fine tuning and improving the program each year. The biggest challenge to the program in 2020 was the Covid-19 pandemic, which delayed the start of the season by over two weeks. If the pandemic is to persist into the Spring of 2021, the District will already have a Covid-19 Safety Protocol document, face masks, and hand sanitizer to supply to inspectors. Additionally, the DNR moved its annual watercraft inspector training online which should allow the program to start much earlier. Other changes will include a revamped online schedule that will allow more flexibility for shifts, hiring a lead inspector to check in on inspectors and answer questions on weekends, and creating a self-inspection checklist to give to boaters to encourage proper decontamination even when an inspector isn’t present at a boat launch.

Lastly, the CLFLWD’s watercraft inspection program would not be possible without the support of the community and local lake associations. Their generous financial contributions and feedback is greatly appreciated and goes a long way to support the program. In 2021, the District will again seek out passionate water stewards for the watercraft inspector positions that will best represent and serve the community to preserve the ecological health and recreational quality of the area’s waterbodies.



Figure 14.
CLFLWD
inspectors at
Forest 1 (west
access)