

Join With COLA to Protect County Waters

The COLA Call

by Ed Mutsch

Have you noticed the billboards and roadside signs admonishing the citizenry to Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers? These are but one manifestation of the efforts of a group of dedicated individuals concerned about the threat to county waters from such aquatic interlopers as curly leaf pondweed, Eurasian water milfoil, spiny water flea, zebra mussels, and other aquatic invasive species (AIS). This Hubbard County COLA AIS task force considered the AIS threat to be sufficiently urgent that, early in 2007, it made a leap of faith commitment of nearly \$20,000 to a program directed at increasing public awareness of AIS and the risk they pose to fishing, boating, swimming, and all other forms of water recreation on Hubbard County lakes. This commitment was very much an "unfunded mandate", since it committed COLA to spend dollars it did not then have.

The gamble proved worth taking, as the DNR, numerous lake associations, a number of local businesses, and a few individuals responded to the COLA call for contributions to fund the effort. These contributions, together with COLA dollars, enabled the rental of 4 billboards carrying the "Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers" message and the erection of 40 smaller such signs on township & county roads, launch access roads, and resort properties. Two training sessions were arranged under COLA auspices, at which attendees were educated on how to recognize various AIS and how to inspect boats and trailers for possible AIS presence; subsequently, inspection events were held on various county lakes. Numerous presentations were made to county groups such as the LWV, Rotary, resort association, lake associations, and county commissioners, to name but a few, while this newspaper made space available for this column, providing COLA a conduit for communicating with the broader public not only on the AIS menace, but on the full range of issues affecting the water resources that are such an important part of the north central Minnesota quality of life. [All previous The COLA Call columns can be accessed at www.mnwaters.org/hubbardcola.]

The unrelenting AIS threat, the first year accomplishments of the COLA effort, and the receipt of numerous public comments, questions, and expressions of support all suggested progress in the effort to expand public awareness of the issue and strengthened COLA resolve to build on first year success. The task force was further encouraged when learning in early February 2008 of a new DNR-provided Invasive Species Prevention Grant program under which applicants were eligible to receive a maximum of \$10,000 for approved projects. An intensive task force effort to meet a February 25, 2008 deadline resulted in a three part proposal which was subsequently approved and funded to the extent of \$8820.

One component of the DNR grant-funded COLA AIS effort will continue the billboard messages and expand the first year signage effort to additional county launch sites, township roads, DNR launch access roads, and resorts.

A second component will involve partnering with resorts to create awareness and educate resort owners and guests about AIS. Literature and brochures for distribution and display will be developed, and DNR AIS informational pamphlets will be distributed to resorts and businesses; watercraft inspection guidelines will be

developed for resorts.

The third component will involve a cooperative effort with the Big Sand Lake Association to develop a brochure for watercraft owners on watercraft washing station locations. The project will involve working with the DNR to establish wash station specifications and to develop car wash location signage.

While the COLA AIS task force was extremely pleased to qualify for support under the DNR AIS grant program, the requirement on grant recipients to match grant dollars puts the organization back in a fund raising mode. Hubbard County citizens---and anyone else, for that matter---concerned to preserve and protect our precious water resources and the quality of life which they create are encouraged to contribute to an effort that serves the interest of all Hubbard County citizens whether or not they own lakeshore property and whether or not they themselves use the county's water resources for any form of water recreation. Users and non-users alike benefit from the huge economic impact of vacationers' dollars attracted to the area by its many lakes and rivers and, conversely, will be adversely impacted by their AIS contamination.

Those disposed to support the COLA effort should direct their donations to Hubbard County COLA, P.O. Box 746, Park Rapids, MN 56470; use the check memo line to specify support for COLA AIS task force.