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Chemicals will fight weeds in Lake Cochituate

By **Claudia Torrens / Daily News Staff**

Sunday, January 8, 2006

NATICK -- The long-awaited state plan to control invasive aquatic weeds that by now have taken over 150 acres of Lake Cochituate includes the use of herbicides fluridone and diquat, a state official confirmed this week.

Fluridone -- also known as sonar -- will be used throughout the lake but mostly on South Pond in Natick. Diquat will be used in smaller and specific areas of the lake, like North Pond and Middle Pond, said Mike Gildesgame, director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation Lakes and Ponds program.

The lake will be treated with herbicides to mostly control the spread of Eurasian milfoil, a non-native invasive weed that pushes plants, fish and people out of its way.

"We are looking at a wide range of options for the lake, but my knowledge is that herbicides are the best way to start," said Gildesgame after a public meeting organized by the Cochituate State Park Advisory Committee last week in Natick.

After a first approach with herbicides, the state would also use other non-herbicide methods like hand-pulling, netting and maybe even by the introduction of weevils -- bugs that belong to the beetle family and feast exclusively on Eurasian milfoil.

Gildesgame said that of the 3,000 lakes and ponds in Massachusetts only a dozen have been treated with herbicides. He said he did know how many have been affected by milfoil in the state.

The chemicals are safe, the state official repeated various times.

"These chemicals have been used for 20, 30, 40 years. I would like to see one example, one single example, of one of these herbicides negatively affecting a drinking water source," said Gildesgame.

The state official said during the meeting that diquat and fluridone are registered for reservoirs and water source supplies.

The DCR will file a notice of intent in approximately two weeks with the towns of Natick, Wayland and Framingham proposing the use of these chemicals and the other non-herbicide methods. The plan will need the review and approval of each Conservation Commission, which could also put new conditions.

Reaction to the state's proposal has been mixed.

For Dr. James Samels, a member of the group Save our Shores, this is good news. While years ago milfoil was at the other side of South Pond, where he lives, he can now see it right in front of his home, coming out to the surface, he said.

"We are pleased the state has exercised prudent judgment in selecting this application," said Samels. "By attacking this problem by the root we can finally all benefit and enjoy the lake in its natural state."

Samels said he only regrets the three or four years that have passed with nothing done, letting milfoil spread aggressively.

Members of the group Protect Our Water Resources think differently.

The group's position is that herbicides pose dangers to the lake's animals and plants and threatens the town's drinking water. There are other economically efficient, non-chemical and longterm methods that could control the weeds, the group says.

"We have not seen the plan yet. Until the plan is filed with the Conservation Commission we have decided to postpone any idea of what we might do after," said Carole Berkowitz, spokeswoman of POWR. "Our group will discuss what to do after that."

Milfoil was first discovered in South Pond in 2002. A herbicide plan approved by the Conservation Commission two years ago was scrapped after some residents appealed to the state Department of Environmental Protection. State officials will present the new plan soon, but residents could try to block this one, too.

Some of Natick's drinking water is supplied by wells that pull from the aquifer near the lake.

The milfoil problem mostly affects Natick, which is where the most part of the 625-acre water body lies. But part of North Pond is in Framingham and part in Wayland, too.

Brian Monahan, Wayland conservation administrator, said chemicals have been used to treat North

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Pond before but this year weed pulling is the method used to take care of nuisance weeds, not Eurasian milfoil. On Heard Pond the town uses mechanical harvesting. On Dudley Pond hand-pulling was started last year.

Monahan preferred not to comment when asked what he thinks about the state proposing chemicals for the lake,

"I don't know. I have not seen it (the plan) yet," he said.

Carlton Layne, a former EPA employee in the area of pesticide registration, was one of the speakers at this week's meeting at the Morse Institute Library.

Layne told the audience how invasive aquatic plants pose a risk to drinking water quality, fish, wildlife habitat and flood control as well as mosquito control, among other things.

Each pesticide proposed for commercial use goes under 120 studies before it is registered, said Layne. It costs between \$60 to \$80 million to register a pesticide because the tests to prove if it works and is not harmful to human health are multiple, he added.

"It takes years for these products to get out to the market," he said.

Mike Netherland, project manager with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Aquatic Research Group, said diquat was registered in 1962 and is used to treat between 80,000 to 120,000 acres per year in the U.S.

Fluridone, a white crystalline solid with no odor, was registered in 1986 and is used to treat 150,000 acres per year.

"Fluridone is allowed to be in drinking water if the amount used does not surpass 150 parts per billion," said Netherland.

Both experts have reviewed the state's plan and recommended it at the meeting as the best and most safe option for Lake Cochituate.

"I feel this is the last chance for our lake," said Samels.

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