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State files herbicide plan with Natick, Framingham and Wayland

By **Claudia Torrens**/ Daily News Staff

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Opponents of the use of chemicals in Lake Cochituate said they haven't decided whether they will appeal a state plan that proposes the use of the herbicide Sonar on the South Pond and Middle Pond sections of the lake.

The state this week filed two notices of intent with the towns of Natick and Framingham proposing the use of herbicides as well as other nonchemical methods to control different types of milfoil.

The aquatic plant is a non-native weed that can choke off plants and fish and make use of the lake difficult for people.

"Until our group has a chance to take a look at them, we don't know what we will do," said Carole Berkowitz, spokeswoman for the group Protect Our Water Resources. "But we are still looking for nonchemical approaches to deal with the milfoil problem. We still feel we need to try other alternatives."

If opponents of herbicides appeal the plan, they could halt the proposed use of chemicals. A first herbicide plan approved by the Conservation Commission more than two years ago was scrapped after some residents appealed to the state Department of Environmental Protection.

Now, milfoil has taken over 58 of the 246 acres of South Pond in Natick. The problem also affects Middle Pond, which is in Natick and Wayland, where milfoil covers 39 acres of the 168-acre basin. In North Pond -- with parts located in Natick, Wayland and Framingham -- the problem is less severe, with less than one acre affected by the weeds.

The Department of Conservation and Recreation will file the same two notices of intent with Wayland on Feb. 1, according to a press release. The state's plan will need the review and approval of each conservation commission, which could also place new conditions.

One of the notices of intent proposes herbicides as the control method and a second one proposes nonchemical uses like hand-pulling, suction harvesting and barrier placements.

Both notices will be presented to the three towns, although the plan says that "herbicides will likely be required in specific locations where aquatic weed growth is too dense."

Vanessa Gulati, spokeswoman for the DCR, said if the plan is approved by the towns, herbicides will be used on the lake by late May or early June.

According to the state, South Pond should be treated with Sonar for the first year of treatment and then with nonchemical methods the following four years. Middle Pond should also be treated with Sonar, as well as herbicides Diquat and/or Aquathol on 2.5 acres near the State Park beach and swim areas.

North Pond should not be treated with chemicals now, but the state is seeking approval to use them in the future if necessary.

The nonchemical option of the plan says a milfoil weevil study should be conducted on North Pond to target Eurasian milfoil. Weevils are bugs that belong to the beetle family and feast exclusively on Eurasian milfoil.

Hand-pulling the weeds is recommended on South Pond during the first year of treatment only if plants are not completely controlled by Sonar.

Some of Natick's drinking water is supplied by wells that pull from the aquifer near the lake. According to the plan, the herbicides proposed are state and federally registered herbicides and do not pose a risk to human health.

Bill Frantzen, member of the group Save our Shores, said he was happy about the state's proposal.

"Anybody who attended that last meeting would clearly see that using chemicals poses absolutely no risk to the public," said Frantzen. "But there is risk to the public if we don't treat. People get entangled in the weeds; it will continue to cost taxpayers money if we don't treat."

Frantzen was referring to a meeting organized by the Cochituate State Park Advisory Committee this month in which two experts defended the use of chemicals at the lake. Both experts said there is no data showing that reasonable amounts of Sonar -- also known as Fluridone -- and Diquat, have negative effects on human health.

"Anything that is nonchemical is a waste of taxpayers money and it is a waste of time," said Frantzen.

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Bob Bois, Natick's environmental compliance officer, said the town's Conservation Commission will hold a hearing on the state's plan Feb. 2.

Michele Grzenda, Framingham's conservation administrator, said Framingham will hold the hearing Feb. 1.

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