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First published: Wednesday, April 25, 2001

Lake George weed-killing plan defended

Lake George-- Risk to other plant species doesn't outweigh damage done by milfoil, officials say

Defending a plan that would make Lake George the first Adirondack lake to use a chemical to kill an invasive weed, representatives of the Lake George Park Commission said Tuesday that the proposal is worth doing even if it means sacrificing native plants.

"If we applied (less chemical) we would have a 50-50 chance of succeeding, and it probably wouldn't last a year. That's not good enough. If it's a choice between killing milfoil and saving native species, we'll choose killing milfoil," said Kenneth Wagner, of ENSR International, a private consultant for the group, during a public hearing Tuesday attended by about 50 people.

The plan, submitted to the state in January, is to add more than one ton of Sonar -- a synthetic weed killer -- to four separate bays within Lake George where Eurasian watermilfoil has grown so dense that it can tie up boat engines and tangle swimmers.

But these same areas, which together total 35 acres of the 22,000-acre lake, contain as many as 20 other aquatic plants that could also absorb Sonar, a chemical that eventually starves the plant by halting the production of carotene, a natural sunblock.

Five of those 20 plants are protected species within New York state and some actually filter out particles from the water, contributing to Lake George's clarity.

If approved by the state Department of Environmental Conservation and the Adirondack Park Agency in mid-June, the treatment could begin sometime this summer. Most of the \$215,000 project would be paid for using a state grant.

The consultant's strong words Tuesday met support from local officials at the hearing, who see the milfoil itself as a threat to the lake and its native species. But Wagner drew criticism from environmentalists, who said that the effects of Sonar on native plants have not been properly evaluated.

"It's pretty unacceptable that they have no intention of safeguarding native species," said John Sheehan, communications director for the Adirondack Council. "There is not much emphasis on what the death toll will be except for the milfoil."

The commission wants to add 20 parts of Sonar for every billion parts of water -- a concentration that is twice that recommended by the DEC.

"The agency isn't here to diminish natural species. But this is a larger issue," said Victoria Hristovski, a spokeswoman for the APA.

If it gets the go-ahead, Lake George would become the first lake to use Sonar within the Blue Line. Since 1995, when the herbicide was first registered in the state, it has been applied to hundreds of lakes outside the park.

Proponents of the Lake George proposal say that there is no other choice. Since 1986, when the idea of using Sonar on a one-acre stand of Eurasian watermilfoil within the lake was first proposed, the weed has spread to 136 locations. Nonchemical techniques, such as hand harvesting, suction harvesting and benthic mats have narrowed the number to 30.

"It's an admission of defeat. It's saying we have failed to manage this God-given resource," said Mark Johnson of the Lake George Park Commission.

Since it takes only a tiny snippet for the weed to grow into a new plant -- an adaptation that has helped Eurasian watermilfoil spread throughout the state since it was first discovered in 1900 -- managers and town officials want to kill off the densest stands.

They argue that leaving milfoil alone could do as much damage as the Sonar when it comes to water clarity, recreation and diversity of native plants.

"The milfoil will choke out the natives that exist," said Lynn LaMontagne, executive director of the Lake George Land Conservancy, a group that does not take formal positions on proposals.

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