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Herbicide approved for lake

By CHRIS KNIGHT, Enterprise Senior Staff Writer

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RAY BROOK - The state Adirondack Park Agency has approved the use of an aquatic herbicide to control Eurasian watermilfoil in part of Lake Luzerne - the first time the agency has ever approved the use of a herbicide in an Adirondack lake.

The town of Lake Luzerne plans to treat 11 acres at the southern end of the lake with 1,560 pounds of Renovate OTF, the commercial name of the aquatic herbicide Triclopyr, over three days in mid-May. The treatment area will be cordoned off using a 275-foot "sequestering curtain" that will be stretched across the lake.

APA Environmental Program Specialist Ed Snizek told commissioners that the goal of the project is to eradicate or greatly reduce the dense population of milfoil at the southern end of the lake and restore native plants.

Over the past three years, town officials have tried to control milfoil in the lake using hand harvesting and benthic mats that smother the plants. But the cost of those time-and-labor intensive methods led the town to look at other options.

The state approved the use of Renovate OTF as an aquatic herbicide in 2007. It was first used in Saratoga Lake in 2008 and has since been used in several other lakes around the state.

Snizek said the treatment at Lake Luzerne is planned early in the season because milfoil is one of the first plants to come up in the spring. Native plants will repopulate the lake relatively quickly following the treatment, he said.

Snizek said the herbicide is not considered a carcinogen and is being used in a concentration that is "practically" non-toxic to fish, birds or mammals.

The agency received 26 letters in support of the project and one letter, from the Adirondack Council, requesting an adjudicatory hearing. The environmental group said treating a lake with a herbicide should only be a last resort and that Triclopyr used elsewhere has killed other plants.

"The APA needs to review the available, non-toxic options, and whether they have been fully explored, before it considers granting a permit to dump 1,500 pounds of herbicide in a portion of this magnificent lake," Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian Houseal said in a Tuesday news release.

Houseal also said a protected species called water marigold is found in the lake and could be susceptible to Triclopyr.

But since the treatment will take place in early spring, plants like water marigold "have yet to emerge and therefore will not be impacted," Snizek told the agency. He also said the concentration of Triclopyr being used in Lake Luzerne is less than what has been used in other lakes.

Last year, the chemical was used to treat 234 acres in Cazenovia Lake, which is also home to the water marigold. Snizek said the herbicide reduced milfoil densities significantly and did not impact the protected plant.

He said the project could serve as a model for the "limited and highly controlled use" of approved herbicides to control milfoil in other lakes in the Adirondacks.

"If it is effective, this could be the equivalent of the first cell tower in the Adirondacks," said Commissioner Frank Mezzano. Commissioner Richard Booth said he was "very uneasy" about the project, but eventually voted in support of it.

"This is a big decision," he said. "This stuff has been used in a variety of places. But the other places are quite different. Having to make a decision about how comparable those other places are is difficult."

As a condition of its approval, the APA required six monitoring sites to be set up inside and outside of the treatment area.

Once the chemical is applied, no swimming is allowed in the treated area for three hours. Water from the lake can't be used for drinking or food preparation until the concentration falls below .05 parts per million, although Snizek noted there are no private or public water intakes on the lake.

The chemical is not expected to eliminate all the milfoil in the southern part of the lake. The town plans to use hand harvesting and other milfoil control methods after the chemical treatment takes place.

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