

Post Star 9/7/92

Region awaits weapon in war against weed

DEC decision on use of Sonar expected soon

By David Kibbe
Staff Writer

For six years, businesses and lake associations have been asking the state Department of Environmental Conservation to approve the use of a pesticide to kill milfoil, a notorious weed that has invaded Lake George and other lakes in the eastern Adirondacks.

The Eurasian milfoil weed has spread across lakes, despite small-scale efforts to control it, making some areas dangerous for swimming and unsuitable for boating. It also kills off native plants and waterlife, and clogs water intake pipes.

Within the next year, lake-watchers may have their answer.

In August, the DEC completed its last hearing on the use of fluridone, an aquatic herbicide with the brand name, Sonar. The DEC will continue to accept written comments on the proposal until Sept. 14.

After the deadline for public comment, the agency has one year to make a decision under its timetable for approving new chemicals, said DEC spokesman R.W. Groneman.

"We are anxious to complete the record and make a decision as quickly as possible, giving consideration to all the issues," Groneman said.

Sonar, specifically created five years ago by Dow-Elanco to handle the milfoil problem, has been approved by the federal Environmental Protection Agency and has been registered in 47 states.

Some lake activists say Sonar has been proven to be safe, and the EPA allows it to be used in water areas where people swim and drink. Lake activists fault the DEC for not approving it as other states did,



Rob Barendse

A clump of milfoil mixed with other aquatic weeds at Shepard Park.

including Florida, Michigan, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.

The chemical completely destroys the milfoil, and the chemical dissipates within five months.

But even if the use of Sonar is approved as presently proposed, Lake George and other lakes might not be any closer to using it on milfoil.

The DEC's current regulations prevent Sonar from being used where people swim and from where drinking water is drawn.

The regulations would make it impossible for Lake George and other lakes to use

See Weed: Back Page

From Page A1

Sonar, lake activists said. They are urging the DEC to approve the use of Sonar and eliminate the restrictions.

"DEC's hard line is not really grounded in fact," said Ralph Soda, a Lake Luzerne representative on the Coalition of Lakes Against Milfoil. "It makes you wonder why they take it. I think it's just a state of mind they are in."

Mary-Arthur Beebe, the executive director of the Lake George Association, said her group has asked the DEC for hard evidence why Sonar should be restricted.

"There's absolutely nothing substantial they could provide to us that was tied to the facts," she said. "It was more philosophy."

Groneman said the DEC's regulations are based on state Department of Health standards on the use of chemicals in public bathing and drinking water.

"We are very conservative in the environmental sense of what chemicals we will allow to be used in New York state," he said. "The fact that it's good enough for the EPA doesn't mean it's good enough for us."

Groneman said the DEC once banned a pesticide that was approved by the EPA. The pesticide was later proved to be dangerous.

"We're dealing with Lake George, one of the most pristine bodies of water in the state," he said. "We want to keep it that way. Any time you put anything in the lake, you don't know what all the side affects will be."

"If we err, we err on the side of caution. In the area of pesticides, you're talking about chemicals that kill things."

Lake activists and business owners say that milfoil, not Sonar, is threatening to kill the lake.

The use of Sonar to handle the problem has been supported by the Adirondack Regional Chambers of Commerce, the Lake George Chamber of Commerce, the Lake George Park Association and the Warren County Board of Supervisors.

"It will save the fishery," Beebe said. "It will protect the quality of the water, which is changing for the worse in areas where milfoil is growing right now."

"Environmentally, there a huge benefit. Imagine what it is economically. If we don't have a clean and usable lake at Lake George or Lake Luzerne or Eagle Lake, who is going to come there? Who is going to pay money to come there for vacations or to buy a home?"

During the last session of the state Legislature, the Senate passed a bill sponsored by Sen. Ronald B. Stafford, R-Plattsburgh, to allow the use of Sonar. But the bill was killed in the Assembly.

Milfoil was discovered in Lake George in 1985. Since then, it has spread to more than 90 sections of the lake, including off Shepard's Cove and Million Dollar Beach, Beebe said.

Milfoil was foreign to the lake. It is believed to have been brought there from boats and boat engines. Milfoil also began appearing in other lakes, including Glen Lake, Brant Lake, Lake Luzerne and Eagle Lake.

Wendy Davis, chair of the Coalition of Lakes Against Milfoil, which represents 13 lakes in the area, said the state was not educating boaters about how milfoil is spread. She said Vermont posted signs and gave boaters information on the weed.

"You look at all their DEC publications for fishing and boating. There's no reference to milfoil at all. They hit very hard on zebra mussels, but there's nothing on Eurasian milfoil."

Local governments have struggled to come up with the money to harvest the milfoil by hand or through suction machines. The milfoil can spread when it is not entirely removed, because pieces float away and regenerate.

The milfoil can also be controlled through the use of mats.

The cost to clean up milfoil in Glen Lake, Lake Luzerne and Brant Lake through conventional methods is estimated to top \$300,000 — money that the Warren County Board of Supervisors doesn't have.

A federal and state grant supplied Lake George with \$45,000 to partially tackle its milfoil problem this year. The town of Lake Luzerne and Warren County spent \$30,000 removing weeds from the lake this year.

The Coalition of Lakes Against Milfoil maintains that New York State needs a comprehensive program to combat the weed. It has appeared in 40 of the 62 counties in the state.

Approving the use of Sonar would be the first step, lake activists said.

"Letters have gone out every month, every year, every week practically, to these people who do not listen," said Jack Cushing, a former chairman of the Adirondack Regional Chambers of Commerce.

"I feel here is a prime example of bureaucracy, where regulatory agencies like the pesticide division are growing and growing, almost at the rate milfoil is growing."

"They're making legislation, when they're only supposed to be a regulatory agency."