

# SONAR use debated for Lake George milfoil problems

NANCY O'BI  
Editor

TICONDEROGA — To SONAR or not SONAR, that has become the question for Lake George.

The chemical known as SONAR has been used in lakes throughout the country and state to control the invasive water weed called Eurasian Watermilfoil, and proponents of using the chemical in Lake George have been frustrated by a recent decision by the Adirondack Park Agency (APA), denying approval to use SONAR this spring pending further hearings.

Eurasian Watermilfoil, referred to as just 'milfoil,' is native to Europe, Asia and North Africa and was first discovered in this country in 1942 where it was most likely brought here in the ballast of a ship. The weed can now be found throughout the U.S. and Canada. Milfoil spreads quickly, crowding out native plants and diminishing fish habitats as well as inhibiting swimming, fishing and boating in areas of infestation.

SONAR was proposed for use on approximately 36 acres of Lake George, according to Michael White, executive director of the Lake George Park Commission (LGPC).

"The overall lake is about 28,000 acres, just to keep this in perspective," White said. After environmental groups such as the Adirondack Council protested to the proposal, a scaled back version was agreed to by most parties as part of a settlement discussion. That new proposal was for just two sites, Moonlight Harbor and Paradise Bay, but the APA rejected the plan, asking for further scientific data on the chemical before giving its OK for application.

"We're currently working with the original plan," White said. "That includes four sites, including Sawmill Bay and West Tongue Mountain Cove as well as Moon-

light Harbor and Paradise Bay.

White said no dates had yet been confirmed to begin the hearing process, which he said were adjudicatory in style.

"It's kind of courtroom style, with witnesses sworn in to testify and subject to cross examination by opposing parties," White said. "It's presided over by an administrative law judge." Technical experts from around the country will be called on to present expert testimony on the use of SONAR.

"There really aren't any negative effects (to using SONAR) from our perspective, all concerns have been adequately addressed," he said. "There's no basis for not going ahead, but we do want to bring all the facts out."

John Sheehan of the Adirondack Council sees things differently.

"Like any other chemical herbicide or pesticide, we think it should be a last resort in controlling an invasive species," he said. "Lake George has several species of plants not found anywhere else, some extremely rare. Our desire is to keep all pieces of the lake's biological diversity together." He said that SONAR is designed to interrupt the photosynthesis process in plants and it is effective on a variety of different plants. "We have no idea what impact it will have on the rare species in the lake," Sheehan said.

Mary-Arthur Beebe of the Lake George Association (LGA) agrees that the lake has some rare species that need to be protected.

"SONAR is very selective in the plants it kills," she said. "It has a very high kill rate with milfoil, and one particular rare species would be killed by SONAR, but the milfoil is killing them anyway, that has failed to be stated, milfoil is bad for lake ecology. We will transplant these native species to the areas where the milfoil is killed."

Beebe said that the LGA has always said no to any chemicals in the lake unless

absolutely needed and safe for those who use the lake.

"SONAR has been proven to work in many locations throughout the country," she said. "New York is the only state that says you can't swim in an area that SONAR has been applied within 24 hours. Everywhere else, swimming is allowed immediately. It is not harmful to drink lake water after SONAR has been applied, it's probably safer than water that comes through a water filtration plant."

Sheehan questions the need for SONAR at all. He said that milfoil has been in the lake since the '80s and only eight percent of the lake is capable of supporting the weed and less than two percent of the lake actually has milfoil.

"Of the 140 or so sites monitored or treated for milfoil, all but a couple of dozen are now free of it," Sheehan said. He said methods such as hand harvesting and mats placed on the lake bottom are responsible for these successes.

"We commend the LGPC, the LGA and the Fund for Lake George for making this work," he said.

Beebe said that hand pulling works in areas where just a few plants are growing, but it is not possible in large beds.

"Fragments of milfoil will just re-root and spread, making the problem worse," Beebe said. "It just doesn't work in dense beds."

As expected, there are differing points of view on the outcome of this next hearing process.

"We're very glad that we're going back to the original plan," said Beebe. "We would learn enough from doing it once

more. We expect to get a very high degree of success with this plan, and also allow a great many native plants to repopulate the lake."

Sheehan feels the next hearing process something of a waste of time.