



AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES PROGRAM

2025 SUMMARY

Program Background

The Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Program works year-round to prevent invasive species, like quagga, zebra, and golden mussels, from populating the drinking water source for over 120,000 residents in Whatcom County. These tiny invaders can foul drinking water intake pipes and drinking water taste, ruin boat engines, disrupt aquatic ecosystems, and harm native species. Once invasive freshwater mussels move in, they are nearly impossible to remove and very expensive to manage.



Zebra and quagga mussels



2025 AIS Program Staff

AIS Program Staff

The AIS team protects Lake Whatcom by inspecting boats, regularly monitoring for new detections, and teaching the community about how to recreate responsibly in a drinking water reservoir. By participating in the AIS Program, each boater helps protect our drinking water and ensures vital stewardship for future generations.

Intercepting a High-Risk Boat

In 2025, the AIS Program intercepted its first vessel fully encrusted with invasive mussels. The high-risk pontoon arrived in Whatcom County from out of state during the off-season. It had previously operated in infested waters and bypassed highway checkpoints along its route. Even though the mussels were dead upon arrival, the AIS team performed a rigorous decontamination. Removing every trace of biological material is critical, as even dead shells can trigger false positives in eDNA sampling and compromise the accuracy of our water quality monitoring. The team spent four hours and used 400 gallons of high-temperature water to ensure the boat was completely safe to launch.



Zebra and quagga mussels on pontoon



Decontaminating mussel-fouled pontoon

This encounter highlights the constant threat to our local drinking water and confirms why our safeguards are necessary. The launch station gates act as a definitive final barrier, while permit fees fund the specialized labor and equipment needed to manage these complex risks. By investing in these defenses, we proactively prevent the catastrophic ecological and financial costs of an invasive infestation.

2025 BY THE NUMBERS

- 15,572 inspections performed
- 7,127 permits issued
 - 2,930 local permits
 - 740 WA state permits
 - 55 out of state permits
 - 3,282 non-motorized permits

AIS PROGRAM

2025 HIGHLIGHTS

Off-Season Coverage at Bloedel Donovan Park

The AIS Program successfully added new inspection gates at Whatcom County's busiest launch to ensure no uninspected boat enters the water when seasonal AIS staff are not present. Since their installation, the gates facilitated 104 post-season inspections, ensuring continued compliance outside of staffed hours.

Prepared to Respond to Mussels

Local leaders officially adopted the Lake Whatcom Invasive Freshwater Mussel Rapid Response Plan. If invasive mussels are ever detected, there is now a pre-approved, coordinated strategy to act instantly and protect Lake Whatcom.

Risk-Based Rate Structure

Permit fees were updated for the first time since 2019 to allow us to expand protection efforts as visitation to our lakes grow and aquatic invasive species detections occur closer to Whatcom County. The new fee structure reflects the growing risk from out-of-town vessels by charging higher permit rates for boats traveling from further distances, resulting in an approximately \$65,000 increase in annual permit revenue. These funds stay within the program, supporting more inspections and keeping the launches open and effective.

Expansion of Targeted Monitoring

AIS staff added eDNA sampling to their monthly monitoring. This high-tech tool allows detection of invasive species at their earliest life stage before they have the opportunity to reproduce.



Staff monitoring Asian clam density at North Lake Whatcom



Staff performing eDNA testing at South Bay launch



Staff collecting Asian clam size data

No new detections of invasive freshwater mussels.



Crew performing a new permit inspection



Launch station gates at Bloedel Donovan Park



Decontamination of a registered vessel

WHAT'S COMING IN 2026?

- Increased weekday staffing at the South Bay boat launch.
- Monthly eDNA sampling from May through October and increased post-season plankton tows to catch threats early.
- Continued refinements to the remote gate system at Bloedel Donovan Park.
- Adoption of a new off-site permit scheduling system.



Learn more

Find more information about the AIS Program and boating in Whatcom County at whatcomboatsinspections.com or contact us at ais@cob.org.