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## **State water groups initiate zebra mussel economic impact study**

A study of the economic impact of zebra mussels in South Dakota is underway as water resource groups work to elevate the importance of dealing with invasive aquatic species. The \$107,000 study spearheaded by the South Dakota Lakes and Streams Association (SDLSA) is designed to provide legislators and other government leaders the necessary information to better engage in protecting the state's lakes and rivers. The study is being conducted at the University of South Dakota in partnership with South Dakota State University. Assisting in the study is Nanette Nelson, a research economist with the University of Montana. Her 2019 Montana study showed zebra mussels could create between \$299 million to \$497 million in damages in that state. The razor-like mollusk is a major threat to irrigation, hydropower, recreational boating, fishing, tourism, water supplies and more.

SDLSA took the lead on securing financing for the study because the state of South Dakota essentially is "throwing up its hands in capitulation" in dealing with the issue, said SDLSA Board Member Deb Soholt, who also is a former state senator. "The state was not wanting to do this type of study," she said, so SDLSA provided the leadership. "Other states are fighting it (the spread of zebra mussels) very hard," she said. "We believe it is important to conduct the needed research to understand the economic impact, so policy makers have the necessary information to do both containment and mitigation."

South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks has been the state's lead agency, but its approach largely is random boat inspections, and it regularly says there is little the state can do to prevent more infestations. There currently are 22 lakes and rivers in South Dakota infested with zebra mussels, which first arrived in the state in 2015. The infestation pace has recently doubled, with 11 new water bodies infested in the last two years. In 2023, the James River, Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Roy Lake, the Big Sioux River, Big Stone Lake and Lake Oahe were added to the list.

The \$107,000 two-year study is funded by SDLSA, East Dakota Water Development District, Lake Kampeska Water Project District, James River Water Development District, the Vermillion Basin Water Development District and \$12,000 of in-kind contributions from the USD.

Zebra Mussels first entered South Dakota in 2015 in Lewis & Clark Lake. The mussels attach to structure and can clog piping and other mechanical structures. The US Army Corps of Engineers is already planning expensive equipment changes at the Big Bend Dam and Gavins Point Dam. The mussels also attach to boatlifts, docks, boats and other water infrastructure. They also make lakes more susceptible to other water aquatic invasive species. "It is critical we understand the economic impact," Soholt said, "and we expect the study will show us that South Dakota needs to take this much more seriously than it is now."

