

Funds double to combat aquatic invasives locally

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SUNY Oneonta program gets 5-year \$2.2M grant to run CRISP program

- By Mike Forster Rothbart Staff Writer Mar 24, 2022, Updated Apr 1, 2022



Mike Forster Rothbart | courtesy SUNY Oneonta Paul Lord, researcher Jim Vogler and undergraduate intern Deanna Caracciolo prepared for a scuba dive as part of ongoing research on zebra mussels in Otsego Lake in this 2013 photo.
Michael Forster Rothbart

The invasive species that scares Paul Lord the most, he said, is the one he knows nothing about, “the one that we have never given a moment’s consideration to, because we didn’t think it was going to be here.”

Lord, a biology researcher and lecturer at SUNY Oneonta, has run an aquatic invasive species program in seven counties across the Catskills for the past decade. The Catskill Regional Invasive Species Partnership is one of eight regional programs for managing invasives across the state.

SUNY Oneonta’s Biological Field Station has been awarded a five-year, \$2.2 million contract to operate the CRISP Watershed Steward Program, which combats the spread of aquatic invasive species. The new contract doubles the annual budget for the program, the college announced in a media release last week.

The Watershed Steward Program aims to hire 25 summer staff, stationed at boat launches and fishing access sites to educate the public about invasives, teach boat cleaning techniques and provide free inspections of watercraft and equipment. The increased funding allows the program to buy needed equipment, such as a portable power washer, hire more staff and pay them higher wages. “We’ve always had a challenge locally, competing with hospitality industry,” Lord said during an interview on campus. With the new budget, the starting salary will jump from \$13.50 to \$16 per hour.

A primary goal of CRISP is stopping new invasive species from getting introduced, and early detection of newly arrived invasives before they become pervasive. The way to accomplish that is by raising broad public awareness of the species and prevention strategies, according to documentation from the Department of Environmental Conservation. Funded by the DEC, CRISP covers all of Delaware, Otsego and Schoharie counties, and parts of four other counties in the Catskills.

“Locally, we’re very focused right now on quagga mussels. Because we’ve ... been living with zebra mussels for a number of years. We think we understand the threats they pose. But it turns out quagga mussels are like the ugly cousin to zebra mussels,”

Lord said. Quagga mussels can colonize the soft sediments on lake bottoms, while the zebra mussels prefer harder substrates.

Already, quagga mussels “are making drastic environmental changes up in Otsego Lake.”

But Lord and his student researchers already have their eyes on what’s coming next.

“Just outside of the region, we have fishhook water fleas and spiny water fleas that will similarly make big ecosystem changes to our lakes and rivers. They’re real close. They’re just the other side of Mohawk River,” he said. “We’re talking 20 miles, 30 miles.”

“Of course, the Erie Canal, the Mohawk River itself, is a direct highway for any invasive species coming in from the Great Lakes. We are very close to the frontier all the time.”

Some people at the waterfront are eager to learn about invasives. Others just want to get out on the water. “We will give them as much information as they want. Other people we do try to leave them with the message: Clean, Drain, Dry,” said Sarah Coney, a biology graduate student at SUNY Oneonta who is now the CRISP aquatic invasive species manager for the region.

“Our focus has always been on maximizing first encounters. We believe that the biggest change in behavior is most likely to occur in that first interaction,” between a steward and water users, Lord said.

The average boater doesn’t understand that moving an uncleaned boat a short distance can contribute to the problem. “They think it’s all one continuous water body. But as you go further and further downstream on the river, you’re going to encounter more and more invasive species. We don’t want those invasive species from Bainbridge coming back to Otsego Lake,” Lord said.

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