TEMPLE DAILY TELEGRAM

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More plants may weed out vegetation

Environmental group tests treatment wetland

BY ALECIA WARREN
THE COEUR D'ALENE PRESS

HAYDEN, Idaho — Paying no heed to splashing mud, volunteers heaved rolls of mulch onto the square bobbing in the pond by Hayden Lake.

On hands and knees, they pressed in grass, cattails and seeds.

If science and hope come through, in a year the buoyant patch of green and brown will improve water quality, turning the acre-sized settlement pond from murky to ... less murky.

"Nobody expects this to be clear in a year," said Adrienne Cronebaugh, conservation advocate with Kootenai Environmental Alliance, as she brushed dirt off her hands. "But if it's doing its job, it's something you can tell, for sure."

KEA enlisted several volunteers this week to prepare an experimental floating treatment wetland, purported to suck up harmful nutrients in lakes and ponds.

Over the next year, the nonprofit will monitor its impact on the settlement pond, thoroughly polluted from collecting phosphorous that would have otherwise drained into Hayden Lake.

"This is just a dream come true," Cronebaugh said as she watched the group work. "We've thought about this for awhile. We just didn't know if it would ever come to fruition."

Thursday's artificial wetland was a 210-square-foot patch, funded by $7,000 from donations and grant dollars. It consists of a floating mesh base, which volunteers planted with mulch and native wetland vegetation.

Ideally, the roots seeping through the bottom will suck up nutrients from the water, without re-releasing them.

That's a crucial cleaning service, said scientist Karen Hayes.

Phosphorous in the water produces aquatic weeds, she said.

"When (the weeds) die, they re-release the phosphorous into the water, so it isn't going anywhere," said Hayes, a KEA board member. "If we stopped all the phosphorous that goes into Hayden Lake, water quality would still not improve, because of the phosphorous already in there."

A big question, she acknowledged, is whether the artificial wetland can withstand the region's short growing season.

If it survives to suck up properly, she said, KEA will pursue more grants and create a cost-sharing program to launch more wetlands by residences around Hayden Lake.

Nile Latta, a Hayden Lake resident who was volunteering on Thursday, said he would be happy to help pay for a floating wetland, if it works.

"I would do it in a heartbeat," Latta said.

The vegetation on Hayden Lake has grown worse over the last few years, he said.

"Right now, you can't get your boat out, without vegetation catching in the prop to where you can't even get out," he said.

His neighbor, Tom Lawrence, said the lake is so cloudy, he can't see the fish anymore.

"It used to be you could see the bottom at 5 feet deep. Now after one and a half feet, it gets cloudy," Lawrence said.

The Twin Lakes Improvement Association might also pursue such artificial wetlands, said organization member Ron Carter.

"Twin Lakes and Hayden Lake need nutrient absorption," Carter said, wiping off sweat after hauling some mulch. "It's taking a toll on the dissolved oxygen in the lakes, which affects our fisheries resources."

A $5,000 grant for the floating wetland was provided by the Cadeau Foundation.

The floating wetland doesn't just clean, Cronebaugh said; it provides a safe habitat for fish.

She has her fingers crossed for its success, she said, pointing to the greenish hue of the settlement pond.

"If we don't get ahead of this issue, this is what Hayden Lake is going to look like," Cronebaugh said. "I don't think anyone would like to swim in that."

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Karen Hayes, foreground, Todd Walker, left, Chris Hardy and Christy Latta work on top of a floating treatment wetland section being constructed for a pond near Hayden, Idaho. The Kootenai Environmental Alliance is preparing the experimental treatment wetland, to test the effectiveness in absorbing harmful nutrients in lakes and ponds.

Jerome A. Pollos, Coeur d'Alene Press/AP

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