

# Volunteers unite to fight milfoil

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While not cast as tight as a college alftime show, there was a certain sense of rhythm to the work of a group of roughly 20 volunteers who showed up Tuesday morning with little notice to help wrestle 1,200 feet of burlap to the bottom of Lake Leelanau in the fight

against Eurasian watermilfoil (EWM). "We are tackling one of the last remaining infestation of milfoil ... Many hands make light work especially when dealing with 100s pounds of burlap," Lake Leelanau Lake Association Director Annalise Povolo said. "We are hoping to continue working on this (section) for the next week or so and then we will start going back to other barriers in years previous and make sure they are maintained properly, make sure no frag-

ments have landed on it."

All members of the Lake Leelanau Lake Association, the combination of friends, strangers and family worked in tandem at the lake end of Hohmke Road to unravel rolls of smelly burlap, attach rebar with zip ties, then re-roll into a form that would hold tight to an open-hull boat for their final journey to the lake bottom.

"We can do that," said Kelsey Froelich Reimink, who was talking through a cell

phone to her father, lake biologist Ron Reimink. The senior Reimink, who was in a boat helping to unroll the weighted burlap on a particularly fertile part of Lake Leelanau, said more zip ties were needed to keep the rebar in place.

"We are making progress. Milfoil grew quite a bit because of a late ice and early ice-out," Ron Reimink said. "When you clear cut 40-acres of woods, guess what

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FILE PHOTO: KELSEY FROELICH REIMINK



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happens, a couple trees grow and soon it will turn into another woods ... We are starting to see that with the work we are doing there. It's like reforesting, we are encouraged by it."

Catholic theologian James Alison once wrote, "Give people a common enemy, and you will give them a common identity."

The project is being conducted in partnership with the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, who have provided financial support.

On a Tuesday sunny, cool morning in Centerville Township, a small army of residents who identified as conservationists were taking on

enemy No. 1 of Lake Leelanau: Eurasian watermilfoil.

The invasive plant, which was first found in the lake in 2019, has the potential to dominate plant life in a body of water, curtailing boating, fishing and even swimming. The LLLA has been fighting off the predator through an innovative approach of unrolling common burlap on the lake bottom to choke off established weeds before they have a chance to flower and lay down a bed of seeds for generations to come. After a couple years the burlap disintegrates, streaming light to the lake bottom where seeds from native plant emerge.

"It's kind of like a clearcut in the woods," explained Lonnie Rademacher, who chairs the lake association stewardship

committee. He oversees coordinators in five areas — shoreline preservation and township coordination, water safety, boat washing stations, state permits and the milfoil project — and 35 volunteers.

"All the native plants have a chance to come up, and that's what we're finding out," Rademacher continued. "It's ecology working at its best. When you give seeds light, they will grow."

So far, the project has worked as intended, curtailing the spread of invasive milfoil and containing it to mostly the south basin of the lake. While lake associations elsewhere in Michigan have resorted to chemical solutions, the non-toxic approach has been more in keeping with the LLLA's priorities.

But an area off Gordon's Point in south Lake Leelanau has proven problematic even after it became the first place in the lake overlain with burlap in 2020. Milfoil has taken hold on the sides of the original treatment barrier, with some plants reaching 6-8 feet in height in a water depth of 10 feet.

So Rademacher put out an email asking for volunteers, and three days later they arrived with their sleeves rolled up.

"I didn't get to meet everyone, but we were flabbergasted at all the people who showed up. I was impressed that we had (current LLA president) Tom Hiatt, (incoming president) Nancy Popa, and Jennie Keller, president of the (Friends of Lake Leelanau) Foundation

and her three teenage kids. There are a lot of good people here who came to help. That says we are doing our best to solve this milfoil situation," Rademacher said.

Through the help of many hands some 36,000 square feet of burlap was laid over infested bottomland. While impressive, Rademacher concedes that Eurasian water milfoil plays the long game.

"We are not going to eradicate it. We have to learn to control it ... This is a big experiment but we have the best people in all areas involved, whether it's biologists or the business aspect of running something like this. It's a joy to be a part of it," he said.