

WELLESLEY

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Debate centers on pond herbicide

Boaters grounded as weeds flourish

By Lisa Keen, Globe Correspondent | June 2, 2005

Sundays in Wellesley used to mean 30 sailboats racing around Morses Pond.

"I had a Sunfish, and we were part of a group -- the Wellesley Sailing Club -- in the late '60s and early '70s," said Stanley Graham Hodges, who has lived next to the pond with his wife, Mary Evelyn Hodges, for 41 years.

There is little likelihood of seeing a sailboat now on the pond, this Sunday, or next Sunday either. There have been almost no sailboats on the pond since the early 1990s.

The problem is weeds. And one of the proposed solutions, herbicide, is at the center of a fierce debate that could heighten over the next few weeks. The Board of Health and the Wellesley Cancer Prevention Project oppose using herbicide to combat the problem, while the Morses Pond Ad Hoc Committee says the option is safe enough for the town to at least consider.

At the pond group's invitation, the two sides will meet Monday night. On June 16, the Wellesley Natural Resources Commission, which has final say, will hold a public hearing.

Jan Kasetta, Wellesley's director of recreation, also recalled seeing the Sunday regattas when she first came to work in Wellesley 19 years ago.

"I'd say not more than five years after that, it really wasn't worth it anymore," she said.

The problems began in the early 1980s. The town tried to dredge the weeds and carry them away; to dredge them and send them through a floating pipe onto the Wellesley College campus area; and to mow them down. But the mechanical methods proved too expensive and too slow to restore the pond to its sailing glory.

And it's not just the weeds. Robin Boucher doesn't take her two boys to Morses Pond more than once a year because she doesn't like the orange color of the water, which is caused by the copper sulfate used to control the algae.

"It looks like copper and it tastes like copper," said Boucher, who has lived in Wellesley for 15 years. She prefers to drive the extra 20 minutes to Walden Pond. "I love Walden Pond -- it's clear. Morses Pond just doesn't seem like a clean pond."

Effie Luzaitis thinks Morses Pond is clean. She takes her three boys there three or four times a week during the summer, but even she notes that it's murky and "gets a lot of algae in August."

"I wouldn't go in it because I just didn't like the murkiness of it," said Luzaitis, who has lived in Wellesley for eight years. "But my kids think it's great" -- and Luzaitis trusts the town to make sure the pond is safe for her children.

Pulling out an old map of Wellesley from the turn of the last century, Hodges pointed to a tiny circle, one on the opposite side of Route 135 and much smaller than Lake Waban on the Wellesley College campus. It's Morses Pond, named after Daniel Morse, who owned a nearby sawmill. Hodges said the pond grew to its current, much greater, size in the early 1900s when an ice vendor got permission to construct a dam to increase his business.

Just as the size and use of the pond has changed over the past century, so has its condition. According to a water resources specialist hired by the town to study the pond, it is suffering from two major problems associated with a pond's natural aging process: overgrowth of aquatic weeds and too much sedimentation, which makes it murky. The specialist, Ken Wagner of the environmental firm ENSR International, provided the town with a long list of possible ways to remedy the problem.

Wagner recommended a combination of tools, noting that herbicides are one of the least expensive and potentially most effective. However, the town's policy on herbicides assumes "that all pesticides are toxic to some degree, and that even at low levels, may cause serious adverse health and environmental effects."

At the June 16 hearing, some town officials hope to find support for using the herbicide fluridone in one section of the pond. But to test the chemical, the Board of Health and the Natural Resources Commission must agree to a policy waiver.

In a sometimes testy discussion, members of the Morses Pond Ad Hoc Committee went before the Board of Health at its monthly meeting May 13, and members were told that a waiver could be granted only in the case of a public health emergency.

"Recreational use of Morses Pond is a public health issue," said board member Lisa V. Stone, "and we'd all like to see it become as healthy an asset to the community as possible." But the condition of the pond, she said, has "not hit a crisis point" that merits "dumping toxins in there."

Pond committee member Frederick V. Fortmiller disagreed, recalling the story of the frog that tries to jump out if tossed into boiling water but sits motionless if placed into a pot of cool water that is slowly heated to the boiling point. "This is what is happening to our pond," he said.

Wellesley allowed an exception to its no-pesticides policy during the recent threat from the West Nile virus, said Janice Trainor-Tellier, director of Community and Public Health Services. In that instance, the town agreed to allow pellets of larvacide to be placed in town catch basins where mosquito eggs were pooled. It rejected the option of spraying the air to kill existing adult mosquitoes.

Fluridone has been marketed since 1986 as Sonar by a division of Eli Lilly and Co. It has gotten mixed reviews in scientific literature, according to Natural Resources Commission chairwoman Joan E. Gaughan. At a May 2 meeting about Wagner's recommendations, Gaughan said she believes the commission would have to see "conclusive proof" that it is safe before it would agree to allow it.

Sara Frost Azzam, chairwoman of the Wellesley Cancer Prevention Project, a nonprofit group that studies the relationship between cancer and the environment in the suburbs, said her group plans to weigh in "strongly" against the use of fluridone, citing concerns for swimmers and for the water supply.

In addition to being the town's most popular water recreation site, the pond provides more than one-third of its drinking water.

Wagner told the May 2 meeting that fluridone represents a "minimal threat to the water supply," but he acknowledged that each town must decide for itself how much risk it is willing to assume.

The Morses Pond Ad Hoc Committee is scheduled to meet with the Board of Health and the Wellesley Cancer Prevention Project at 8 p.m. Monday. The Natural Resources Commission plans a public hearing for 7:30 p.m. June 16 to discuss herbicide and other options for the pond. The meetings are public and will be held in the Great Hall of Wellesley Town Hall. ■