

November 26, 2014 Update:

The following has been prepared for your information and review.:

Q & A on Comprehensive Swimmer's Itch Program Proposal Prepared by the Higgins Lake Property Owners Association Board

Why do we need a comprehensive plan for Swimmer's Itch (SI)?

SI has been identified as a major problem on Higgins Lake that is significantly affecting our enjoyment of the lake, generating negative publicity about the lake, affecting our property values and hurting the local economy. While not everyone sees it as a major problem, and not everyone is sensitive to the parasite that causes the skin reaction, we believe we need to take decisive action. **What do you mean when you use the word comprehensive?**

We have brought together all of the actions that we are aware of that have been successfully used by other lakes to address the SI problem. They include using a team of biologists who have worked on the SI problem for decades to trap and remove Mergansers broods (the problem ducks) that live on Higgins Lake, finding nests and eggs and removing them, manually removing snails from the lake that release the parasite that causes SI, conducting Merganser harassment that is coordinated with the trap and removal program, fall hunting to reduce the number of ducks that live on and fly into the lake and developing more effective and user friendly preventive lotions and creams. The trap and removal program on Glen lake, using the same biologists we are proposing to work with, showed a reduction in snail infection rates from approximately 2% before the program began to approximately 0.1% at the conclusion of the program.

Are you doing anything else? Yes. We led efforts to form a Michigan Swimmer's Itch Partnership of 10 major lakes in Michigan (Burt, Mullett, Crystal, Torch, Walloon, Higgins, Margrethe, Long, Glen and Leelanau) and we expect to add more. The group is just getting started but we are sharing information and learning about what each lake is doing to address the SI problem, discussing ways to educate and influence government regulators and representatives about the SI problem and looking at research opportunities to name a few. Jim Vondale and Ken Dennings are meeting with the Chamber of Commerce and Realtors Association in Lansing to help educate them about

the seriousness of the SI problem and to seek their help. They also are meeting with a representative from the DNR and the USDA. We have discussed the SI problem with staff from Senator Stabenow's office in Traverse City. He has asked to attend our next Michigan SI Partnership meeting since he has responsibility for 24 counties in northern Michigan including many of our lake association partners. Senator Booher and Representative Rendon have been very helpful and involved in our SI efforts to date. We need to help them and ourselves by reaching out to additional state and federal government representatives and regulators and we need to work as partners with them on this important problem.

What is the status?

We have a proposal from the team of biologists and we are reviewing it. We have begun negotiations with them to determine if an agreement is possible. We are asking major organizations around the lake to review the comprehensive proposal as well before we roll it out to the entire Higgins Lake community. Issues being discussed include the proposed cost of the team of biologists (currently \$225,000 per year for a 3 year program), how it could be funded (a millage is being discussed as one possible option beginning next year in addition to private funding, foundations support and grants), how we could structure the terms of the agreement to give us flexibility (e.g.: only one year at a time, only paying what we collect, etc.), how we coordinate all of the elements, and timing. We are not sure if we can reach an agreement but we are doing our best to try to develop an effective plan and reach a flexible agreement that works.

What is your timing?

Timing is a problem. The biologists need to begin soon to obtain permits so they can start work in the early spring. We will condition any agreement on their ability to get the permits from the government that they need as well as assurances they can do the work according to their permits. We currently don't have a reliable funding source so we will have to begin the comprehensive plan using private donations from the Higgins Lake Community. We are seeing strong support for the comprehensive plan, including from local government representatives, but we still have major hurdles to overcome.

Can we proceed with only some of the elements of the comprehensive plan?

We can, but we believe it will be far less effective. We have the best chance of seeing a significant reduction in SI if we are able to implement all of the elements. The trap and removal program and egg and nest removal program were the key elements of the Glen Lake program. Higgins Lake is a big lake and Merganser harassment efforts are difficult on any lake, especially large lakes. Harassment must be coordinated with (likely delayed until after completion of) a trap and removal program or the ducks will be harder to trap and remove. Mergansers are smart ducks and hunting them also is difficult. Hunters don't value them because of their foul taste. Currently, hunting can only occur in the fall during hunting season. We will work to learn from other lakes in the Partnership that have had harassment programs for years and have been effective in hunting programs. We need to find ways to maximize the effectiveness of each element of the plan. We will continue to work to find new elements to add to our plan.

If we are successful in implementing the plan, when will we see results?

Because the SI cycle mainly involves Mergansers and snails, and snails stay infected for over a year, we will not likely see major results until the third year of the program. To the extent we can identify and manually remove infected snails from lake bottoms in front of our cottages, the effects can be more immediate. The current proposal includes making the biologists available on a weekly basis to educate the Higgins Lake community about the SI problem, what is being done and what progress is being made.

What can we expect from this program?

With current knowledge, we can't expect to completely eradicate the SI problem on Higgins Lake. However, we are optimistic, if we can implement all of the elements of the proposed comprehensive plan, we can significantly reduce the SI problem. Preventive creams that are more user friendly also need to be further tested and made available. A biologist on Lake Leelanau has been working with a new cream that has shown much promise. We want to develop and share information about the effectiveness of various lotions and creams. Longer term, we want to promote and fund research, educate legislators and government regulators and get everyone working together to get serious about addressing this important problem. We need to focus not just on Higgins Lake, but state-wide and nationally. SI is a national and international problem and it appears to be getting more widespread and serious.

Are you considering using chemicals like copper sulphate?

No, we will not use copper sulphate in this comprehensive plan. We want to minimize the environmental impact on Higgins Lake.

How can I stay up to date on SI plan developments?

A summary of the plan has already been posted on the HLPOA website (HLPOA.org) under Environmental Issues and Swimmer's Itch. We will post this Q & A and future updates on the website. By the way, the board has approved a major upgrade to the website which will be rolled out shortly.

How can I help?

Once we finalize the plan we will be looking for volunteers. If we are successful in reaching an agreement on the Merganser trap and removal and egg and nest removal elements of the plan we will need the financial support of the entire Higgins Lake community to fund it.

HLPOA Board

11/26/2014