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'Rock snot' prompts Missouri to consider ban on felt-soled boots

By [John McLaughlin](#)

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Felt-soled boots are still for sale at Bass Pro Shops in Columbia. The Missouri Department of Conservation could soon ban felt-soled boots because of the alga "rock snot," which can be spread after anglers wearing the boots tread through infected waters. Fragments of the alga become embedded in the boot soles.

| [Andrew Williams](#)

COLUMBIA — An invasive goo dubbed "rock snot" that is encroaching on southern Missouri's cool-water streams has prompted consideration of a ban on felt-soled boots in state waters.

The ecological threat, commonly known as

Didymo, is an invasive alga recently found in the tail waters of Bull Shoals Dam in northern Arkansas, about 10 miles south of the Missouri border. Legs of Bull Shoals Lake stretch into Missouri.

Tim Banek, invasive species coordinator for the Missouri Department of Conservation, said the muck has prompted his agency to begin developing regulations that would prohibit felt-soled boots and waders in public waters. Felt soles are the most likely avenue of transport and contamination, he said.

Fragments of the alga easily transport via felt soles because the alga embeds into the spongelike material after anglers walk on it, Banek said. The process is known as fragmentation, and the department recommends that any fishing equipment, not just felt soles, be allowed at least 48 hours

to dry before being used again.

The threat of the alga, according to the Conservation Department's website, is it "can overwhelm native species and disrupt the food chain," which supports fish, such as bass and trout, as well as salamanders, frogs, birds and mammals.

The website said people have reported eye inflammation after swimming in waterways infested with the alga.

Only one cell of rock snot is needed for it to eventually take over cold, spring-fed streams that are abundant in the Ozarks, Banek said, and "it gets so thick, you can't fish."

Although Arkansas has yet to take action on felt soles, many other states, as well as New Zealand, have passed regulations.

Vermont passed a statewide ban on felt-soled boots for all waters, public and private, effective April 1, said John Hall of the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"It's going to be interesting," he said. "It's a major concern for fish habitats. We're going to have to get the word out, so retailers can be prepared."

Jim Marcotte, executive director of Alaska's Board of Fisheries, said the state passed a regulation on felt soles that takes effect in 2012. The regulation only applies to felt soles while fishing, both commercial and recreational.

New Zealand, according to its government website, has banned felt soles, and the crime of knowingly spreading the algae carries a sentence of up to five years in prison and a \$100,000 fine.

Banek offered no timeline for any felt-sole regulations in Missouri. The first step is education, he said.

"We have to do our homework, " he said. "We want to make sure the public is behind this."

The regulation of felt soles in Missouri would be limited to public waters; owners of private land would have to make their own decision, Banek said.

Larry Whiteley, manager of communications for Bass Pro Shops based in Springfield, said the retailer developed Eco-Clear boots that make use of crushed walnut shells for traction. The crushed shells are embedded in a rubber compound designed to keep the alga from attaching.

Whiteley said the chain also offers boots with detachable felt soles and boots with metal cleats. If necessary, Bass Pro Shops would eliminate felt-soled boots from its product line, which he doesn't suspect would hurt revenue.