

Airboat added to salvinia-fighting arsenal

By Steve Bandy, Marshall News Messenger

Thursday, June 05, 2008

UNCERTAIN — The newest weapon in the ongoing fight against invasive aquatic plants on Caddo Lake was unveiled at the Dallas Caddo Club here Thursday morning.

The airboat, donated by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and outfitted for spraying herbicide, affords easier and greater access to the floating pads of water hyacinth and giant salvinia located throughout the waterway.



Courtney Case/News Messenger

Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson, left, State Senator Kevin Eltife and Robert Steight, right, stand next to the newly refurbished airboat to be used in the fight against giant salvinia during a press conference Thursday at the Dallas Caddo Club in Uncertain.

"We've been using it for seven days and we've sprayed 245 acres of hyacinth," said Robert Speight, immediate past chairman of the Greater Caddo Lake Association. "With the smaller boats — the Go-Devils — we'd been using, we were spraying between two and four acres a day. With the airboat, we're hitting between 30 and 40 acres."

Water hyacinth "grows fast, but is easy to kill," Speight said. "Giant salvinia grows fast, too, but it's not so easy to kill. You're looking at three applications."

Mike Turner, one of the two herbicide applicators, added that there's between 4,000 and 5,000 acres of aquatic weeds growing in Caddo Lake. "Our goal right now is to knock it back enough to where we have to go out there and hunt for it," he said.

Speight admits that he and others involved in the Caddo Lake project were, at first, a little

skeptical about the use of an airboat.

"We were using the small boats, the Go-Devils," he said. "Someone came in and said, 'You need an airboat.' I said, 'I don't know about that.' Now that we've used it, yeah, we need an airboat."

Speight added that the smaller boats are still used, primarily to get into the stands of cypress trees where the larger watercraft can't navigate.

The airboat was donated to the Cypress Valley Navigation District by the TPWD. It was outfitted with a new engine, which cost about \$7,500, and the herbicide rigging, at an additional cost of about \$5,000.

"We came in a little under \$13,000," Speight said. "A new airboat, not rigged for spraying, costs about \$45,000."

CVND paid for the new engine and spray rigging.

County Judge Richard Anderson, who presided over the informal unveiling of the watercraft, recognized State Sen. Kevin Eltife, R-Tyler, for his record of support.

Eltife, as a member of the Senate Finance Committee, was instrumental in obtaining \$250,000 for the giant salvinia fight and in restoring state funding for the CVND, which had not, for a number of years, received state funding to protect Caddo Lake, according to Anderson.

Eltife also played a role in cutting through red tape with the donation of the airboat to the CVND, the county judge added.

Eltife, in turn, also lauded the efforts of Rep. Bryan Hughes of Mineola, who represents Camp, Harrison, Upshur and Wood counties, and of Rep. Stephen Frost of Atlanta, who represents Bowie, Cass, Marion and Morris counties.

"It's easy to help you all because you help yourselves," Eltife told the group, referring to the long record of volunteerism at the lake. "Y'all did all the work. Don't thank us, we just did our jobs."

"Caddo is a hidden treasure," he continued. "I wish I could box up everyone in Austin and get them down here to see what we have here."

History

In January 2007 Anderson convened a summit at the Jeffersonian Institute in Jefferson to pledge Harrison County's support for an effort by stakeholders of Caddo Lake to address the spread of giant salvinia and to lay the foundation for enrolling support from other local, state and federal policy-makers.

Due to the unprecedented rains of that month, the giant salvinia had migrated from the Louisiana side of Caddo Lake into the Texas side of the lake. What had been about 300 acres of the giant salvinia situated in Jeemes Bayou in Louisiana, had been broken apart by the flooding and resulted in the westward migration of the weed into the Harrison and Marion

County sides of Caddo.

"Knowing the situation with regard to the fast replication rate of the invasive species was urgent, I felt it was important to solidify a coalition between governmental entities such as Harrison County, the City of Marshall, and local environmental and Caddo Lake-focused groups so that work could begin to solve the problem while funding assistance from the state and federal level — which often takes some time — was being sought," Anderson said.

Among those attending the summit were representatives from Frost's office, the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District, Greater Caddo Lake Association (GCLA), Caddo Lake Institute (CLI), Cypress Valley Navigation District, and Harrison County Commissioner Jerry Lomax.

"As a result of this meeting, plans were commenced for the construction of a barrier extending some two miles across Caddo Lake on the Texas side near the state line," Anderson said. "The fine efforts of Ken Shaw, president of the CVND, Robert Speight, president of the GCLA, and members of these organizations, the construction of the barrier began in earnest."

The fence was erected in about three weeks at a cost of \$35,000.

"National media exposure was provided and that raised awareness about the issue and the effort that began by local government taking the initiative, not waiting for the federal or state governments to take the lead," Anderson continued. "An aggressive public education effort was undertaken by the CLI, informing members of the public as to what the weed looks like and, in order to help prevent or mitigate its spread, how giant salvinia is transported by water craft being moved from lake to lake in and beyond our Ark-La-Tex region."

As part of this effort, Eltife's office was contacted and funding requested. That's how the \$250,000 for 2007-08 and the funding for CVND was obtained, Anderson explained.

"When we met with representatives of Texas Parks & Wildlife in the fall of 2007 to discuss mutual efforts toward herbicide application, we learned that they had a surplus spray boat being retired," he said. "We started the process of obtaining this surplus boat and when problems were encountered, Sen. Eltife again played a key part in getting the unit released."

Grassroots effort

Anderson described the invasive species fight at Caddo Lake as a "bottom up" effort.

"We didn't have time to wait for the federal government," he said. "State government is more nimble and local government is much more nimble."

"Now, with local, state, and federal levels of government and volunteer organizations working together, we're taking purposeful steps to solve the invasive species problem facing Caddo Lake."