

15 Caddo Lake residents learn how to fight invasive water plant

By JIMMY ISAAC, Cox East Texas Friday, February 09, 2007

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Giant Salvinia
Agave

KELLYVILLE — Caddo Lake residents and activists have begun their fight against an invasive aquatic fern that threatens the lake and water systems that serve thousands of people in a two-state region.

Giant salvinia, a free-floating plant native to the Amazon basin of South America, was first discovered on the Louisiana side of the lake in May. The fern's mobility and reproductive capability have moved it across state lines, with a large mat of salvinia discovered Saturday near a swampy Texas island, said Jack Canson, board member of the Greater Caddo Lake Association.

Wind determines the direction of the plant's growth more so than a stream current, he said, and that means it could reach Lake O' the Pines, Lake Cypress Springs and much of the Caddo Lake Watershed.

"It's not a threat in terms of toxicity, but it will clog a water system's intake valves," said Canson, who attended a watershed meeting Thursday.

Fifteen residents were instructed and permitted by state wildlife officials to remove and destroy giant salvinia, which can grow up to a meter thick on the lake's surface and suffocate the ecosystem beneath it.

"It provides no habitat for anything," Canson said. "It blocks out the sun and prevents oxygen from getting into the lake."

Giant salvinia is believed to have hitchhiked into the United States with water garden enthusiasts or other means. The plants expand and compete for space at a rapid rate, which can push the plants's leaves upright from overcrowding, according to a U.S. Department of Agriculture environmental assessment report.

"It probably came into the country under a different name," said Howard Elder, a wildlife department biologist. "All salvinia species have been prohibited in the state of Texas and most of the U.S. for several years. Under a different name, it slips by. It's unassuming, and when it's really small you can't tell it apart from duckweed or many other species."

The fern has been documented in seven Texas lakes since its 1998 arrival to Toledo Bend Reservoir. It was confirmed at four lakes in the past year.

Turtles and alligators could aid in its movement between bodies of water, but Elder said the biggest concern is transport on boating equipment. Most new salvinia infestations are found near boat ramps, he said. Signs notifying lake enthusiasts to clean their boats after leaving the lake will be posted at Caddo around March 1.

"If (boaters) take just one plant or a piece of a plant to another body of water, it can start another colony," said Elder. "Since it is a two-state issue, we want to do our best to take care of our side and hope that Louisiana does that same."

Thirty-six residents learned how to destroy the plant in December. While they continue to locate new infestations in Caddo Lake, Canson and other board members will try to net the large giant salvinia development near that swampy island today. The plant will grow upward, but at least it won't continue to grow outward, he said, and that could provide time for warmer weather, which will make herbicide spraying more effective.

In the meantime, Canson and other officials plan to ask state legislators for funding to combat giant salvinia. Their obstacle is that Caddo Lake is the only natural lake in Texas, which means it has no presiding authority such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Lake O' the Pines, he said.

"(Giant salvinia) had spread three-quarters of a mile in 24 hours last weekend on the south shores of Big Lake right at the Texas-Louisiana line," said Canson. "The state of Texas is responsible for Caddo Lake. There is no other authority. We've got to stop being an orphan."