

Caddo's unwanted plant

Giant salvinia infestation attracting national attention

By SANDRA CASON, News Messenger

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A giant, fern-like plant is creeping into the waters of Caddo Lake, but its entrance has not gone unnoticed, Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson said.

In bringing a state of the county address to Marshall Lions Club, Anderson addressed the problem giant salvinia is creating.

And, he added, the diligence and innovation with which local groups have attacked the weed has attracted nationwide attention.

"The New York Times had a news team here today," Anderson said last Tuesday, and "ABC sent a group last week." The erection of five-foot barricades is the focus of "national attention," he added.

"The first sighting of giant salvinia on Caddo Lake was October 2006. The infestation started in Louisiana and the heavy rains we had in January broke it up on Louisiana and flushed it over into Texas.

"In February and March, the prevailing winds took it back" across the state line.

During the early months of 2007, Anderson said he "convened" a meeting with members of the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District, city of Jefferson and city of Marshall officials "to do something to help ourselves.

"We had a series of meetings," the result of which was the contribution of funds from various entities involved to bankroll the fight against the plant. Because of volunteer labor, a project which should have cost \$150,000 "was done for about \$35,000," Anderson said.

"The material" erected to trap the weed at the Texas/Louisiana border "appears to be working. It's an excellent example of local governments coming together to address a problem," although, he admitted, the salvinia trapping project is a temporary fix.

The long-term solution may be in the development of a beetle — now in experimental stages with Texas Parks and Wildlife services — to "attack the plant," Anderson said.

Currently giant salvinia has no indigenous enemies, allowing it double in size very quickly.

At the Toledo Bend Reservoir, infestation of giant salvinia went from 200 to 3,000 acres in an 18-month period, according to Anderson.

The county judge said there was good news for Cypress Valley Navigation District in that the state budget includes a quarter-million dollar appropriation for the organization, which focuses on Caddo Lake.

"This is the first time in some years that this has happened," Anderson said of the money, adding that "tensions" which existed in the past among CVND board members no longer exist. "They are working together," he said of the Harrison County Commissioners Court appointees.

Anderson also addressed the issue of jail construction, saying two options are under consideration: "adaptive re-use of an existing building" or erection of a new facility on of a portion of the 32 acres owned by the county near the airport.

The judge said meetings with Marshall Independent School District officials have determined: "Yes, there can be peaceful co-existence" between a county jail facility and the high school's agricultural farm.

The need for a new facility is imperative, the judge said, since 45 prisoners are currently being housed in jails outside the county at a cost of \$40 per day per inmate.

Had the original jail construction plan moved forward, Anderson said the county would have found itself "two years later with a nice jail and 100 percent occupancy. We're going to have to build a more substantial jail and built it smarter, too," he added.

The judge said commissioners had asked that he "please explain we are doing everything we can to get the roads fixed. But oil and water don't mix. Our road-building is behind schedule because of the rain."

In addition, Anderson noted road repair has been adversely impacted both by budget cutbacks and the rising cost of road oil. "Our road construction budget has just now gotten back to what it was in 2002," he said, while the price of oil has risen from \$25 to \$75 per barrel.

Anderson pointed out that, unlike the city and school district, the county has only one source of revenue — property tax — with which to finance its road repair. "We are fighting a losing battle on roads," he said, "but we can turn the tides."

Another area in need of attention is the Harrison County Airport, the judge said. "Improvements in recent years have not been many, but he added, that is about to change. "Most businesses that come to evaluate new locations fly in," he said. "It is their first impression of this area and we intend to see what we can do to get it in a more presentable state."

Anderson said the existing runway "does not allow larger planes to land and refuel." However, there is a project under way to expend 90-10 federal-county matching funds that would increase runway length from 5,000 to 6,000 feet.

He said the county will carry into the coming fiscal year \$5.2 million in jail bonds, making for a \$26 million budget for 2007-2008. "We try to be good stewards of your tax dollars," he told his audience.

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