

Giant salvinia is the focus of Congressional hearing in Shreveport

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11:17 AM, Jun. 28, 2011



Louisiana's 4th District Rep. John Fleming (right) talks to Randy Westbrook, Invasive Species Prevention Specialist for U.S. Geological Survey about Giant Salvinia while on a boat tour at Caddo Lake on Monday afternoon. / Henrietta Wildsmith/The Times

Giant salvinia — the Brazilian aquatic plant that has choked local waterways — won't be going away soon, state and national experts said Monday in Shreveport. Finding a way to eradicate the floating fern will take teamwork and time, the group said.

Testimony came during a Congressional hearing at LSU-Shreveport. Rep. John Fleming, R-Minden, hosted the discussion. In a demonstration of bi-state cooperation, Fleming invited Texas Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Tyler, to join. Fleming is chair of the House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs.

Caddo Lake, which is infested with salvinia, crosses the state line and lies in both congressmen's districts. The pair toured the Texas side of the 26,000-acre reservoir after the hearing. Specialists and heads of local and state government agencies offered their research and ideas. The representatives responded with questions.

Lake Bistineau, in Bienville, Bossier and Webster parishes, generally is regarded as the best spot for salvinia to grow — and likewise the worst for native flora and fauna and people who use it for work and fun. The state has lowered the water level in an effort to kill the invasive species. It's reduced thousands of acres of salvinia coverage to dozens.

Fleming asked the panel of experts he invited whether draining Bistineau dry would destroy the infestation. Randy Westbrook, whose focus is preventing invasive species from taking root for the U.S. Geological Survey, said drawing off all the water would be impractical and impossible. Salvinia forms mats that can grow to three feet thick, and they hold water. "That would be one thing you might could do in a swimming pool," Westbrook said, "but I don't think you can do it in a lake with a mud bottom."

State Rep. Henry Burns, R-Haughton, told stories of boaters being hurt jumping out of their vessels into Bistineau and expecting the water to be deeper. There have been no studies, but he believes lower water has hurt property values. "The No. 1 question that I'm asked is 'When are we going to get our lake back?'" Burns said.

State and local governments have tried everything from herbicides to plant-eating insects to cut back on salvinia. Spraying the plants kills them, but the chemicals are expensive. Galleon, among the most popular brands, costs some \$1,800 a gallon, according to Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Head Robert Barham.

South American weevils can do a good job, but they freeze to death in the winter. The LSU AgCenter has raised 1.3 million of the insects in the past decade, according to Dearl Sanders, of LSU's Idlewild Research Station. Cold weather also appears to kill the plant.

Salvinia's earliest known contact with northwest Louisiana was an infestation on Toledo Bend, also along the Texas border, according to the U.S. Geological survey. Researchers believe it was brought to North America for use in water gardens.

It's typically spread as boats move among lakes and rivers. The plant thrives in slow-moving water during hot summers — often doubling in size in a week or less. Growing in thick mats, it blocks sunlight, which is necessary for plants to produce oxygen. That can lead to fish kills.

Authorities also are concerned about what that means for humans who drink the water. Salvinia has been spotted on Cross Lake, Shreveport and Barksdale Air Force Base's water source.

In 2010, Shreveport Mayor Cedric Glover's office suggested building a floating fence as a way to keep salvinia from spreading. That was met with resident and boater protests.