

Lawmakers host hearing on salvinia problem plaguing Caddo Lake

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People from two states will gather Monday to discuss what works in the war on a lake-killing plant that's being kept at bay on the Texas side of Caddo Lake.

"It's the most innocent-looking innocuous plant, but it's like something from a 1950s horror movie when you know about how fast that stuff can grow," U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert said of giant salvinia. "In six months, you can lose a lake."



Giant salvinia has covered the surface of Caddo Lake, destroying aquatic life. (Michael Cavazos/News-Journal Photo)

Gohmert and his Louisiana counterpart, Rep. John Fleming, will hold a public hearing on efforts to lasso the invasive plant Monday morning in Shreveport. Fleming is chairman of the House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs, and is concerned about the Louisiana portion of Caddo Lake and Lake Bistineau, southeast of Shreveport.

Officials with the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Department, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Louisiana State University's Idlewild Research Station, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Caddo Lake Institute, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation and others will testify for the congressmen and public.

The plant has shown up in other parts of Texas, particularly in southeastern portions of the state. "We're going to see it in Lake O' the Pines," said Rick Lowerre, president of the Caddo Lake Institute, which oversees the Caddo Lake Natural Wildlife Refuge. "All the lakes around there. We can eradicate it at Caddo, but it will be back if we don't deal with it elsewhere."

Giant salvinia travels from lake to lake largely on boats and trailers. A sprig loosed from a propeller can reproduce at rapid rates until a full, growing mat forms. That carpet, which can be two or more feet deep, blocks the sun that aquatic life needs while it sucks oxygen from a lake.

The resulting dead plant and animal life decompose into a layer of silt at lake bottom — the hallmark of a dead lake. “Fish die; it cuts off the oxygen,” Lowerre said. “It really creates dead zones.”

Detecting traces

Giant salvinia has been discovered in a dozen states since 1995 and is on the federal noxious weed list. A trace of the plant was detected in Caddo Lake in 2007, according to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The department’s annual survey found 1,100 acres of thick, green salvinia mat on the Texas side of Caddo a year later. In 2009, that had grown to 3,200 acres.

By September, though, years of action by a partnership of government, private entities and residents on the Texas side began to show results as 605 acres were identified in the state agency’s annual assessment. Hard freezes this past winter further hurt the plant at Caddo, but human credit goes to a partnership of the Caddo Lake Institute, Cypress Creek Navigation District, state and federal agencies and individuals in Uncertain, Karnack and the surrounding area.

“My message, and I think that of a lot of people, is that there has got to be a big, coordinated effort,” Lowerre said. “Every one piece has got to come into place.” Those pieces have blended direct harvesting of the plant for destruction, herbicide application and the placement of a two-mile net/fence on the Louisiana border that runs across the lake. Organizers most recently enlisted one of the few natural predators the plant knows, the salvinia weevil, which is being grown at the institute and set loose to munch.



John Sanders (photos above and below), a Marshall native and Kansas businessman, cuts through patches of giant salvinia in his mechanical harvester Tuesday, June 2, near Tucker's Camp on Caddo Lake. (Michael Cavazos/News-Journal Photo)



A joint effort

Gohmert said Monday's hearing will provide Louisiana residents a chance to gather information on Texas successes. "Louisiana hasn't fought it on their side like Texas has," he said. "So, it's really taken over in Louisiana. "The thing that's struck me is it's going to take a joint effort — fishermen, boatsmen, everybody is going to have to participate or it won't work."

Caddo marinas urge boaters to thoroughly wash their vessels and trailers before they launch and after they're out of the lake. "That's the very best thing that people can do is rinse their trailer constantly," Gohmert said. "Make sure there isn't anything green on their trailer. Also, if you're on the lake and see a small, little innocuous water plant, they need to know what giant salvinia looks like. Because, really, it's not giant. It's a tiny, little plant."

State Rep. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola, had been invited to testify at Monday's hearing, but the ongoing special legislative session in Austin will keep him out of his district, which includes Caddo's southern shore. "The cold weather helped (this past winter)," Hughes said. "But we're also very thankful for the spraying, and for the weevils that have been released to eat the stuff. All these tools are working."

Public awareness

Along with the chance to share knowledge, a goal of Monday's hearing is to raise the profile of the destructive plant. "It will help raise the public awareness that that (2010) freeze is not going to solve all our problems," Lowerre said. "I think the hearing is to say what's possible. How do we attack this problem. I think they're bringing all the right people."



John Sanders, a Marshall native and Kansas businessman, heads back to Tucker's Camp on Caddo Lake to unload his mechanical harvester of giant salvinia. (Michael Cavazos/News-Journal Photo)



Giant salvinia that is being removed from Caddo Lake by John Sanders, a Marshall native and Kansas businessman. (Michael Cavazos/News-Journal Photo)