

Giant Salvinia Spreading

Austin American Statesman:

Posted: 9:00 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 6, 2013

OUTDOORS: MIKE LEGGETT

Troublesome plant continues to spread in Texas The name, salvinia molesta, pretty much says it all.

The troublesome plant continues to plague Texas waterways especially in the eastern and southern parts of the state. And it continues to be a threat to spread to lakes and ponds in Central Texas.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department continues to find new infestations of giant salvinia. During the fall, the plants were found in a number of East Texas lakes. And this week, TPWD renewed a request of boaters and anglers to take extra precautions when moving from lake to lake.

Biologist Lynn Wright, who works in the Texas Parks and Wildlife fisheries department in Marshall, says new infestations have been confirmed in Lake O' The Pines, Gilmer, Murvaul, Wright Patman and Lake Welch.

And though the number of plants is mostly small — only a single leaf in Lake Welch — small is enough for giant salvinia. "They're not serious yet but it only takes one leaf to start an invasion," Wright says. "Salvinia can double it's surface area in just a matter of days."

Think about that: One acre becomes two becomes four becomes eight — all in a short period of time. It's a progression that has allowed giant salvinia to completely cover some small lakes and to take giant chunks out of larger reservoirs like Sam Rayburn. And when the infestation reaches total coverage, the lack of sunlight and the lack of nutrients in the water can leave a lake devoid of life.

There are even reports that in some areas, especially in Brazil and South America where giant salvinia originates, the plant is used as a natural cleaner for sewage effluent ponds. The plant takes up all of the nutrient load in the ponds, leaving virtually drinkable water behind.

Texas Parks and Wildlife is trying to alert boaters and anglers who might come into contact with the plant on affected lakes so that they can thoroughly clean their boats and trailers before moving to another lake. It's believed that the latest lakes added to the giant salvinia list were

invaded by just a few plants that originated in nearby Caddo Lake. Murvaul could have gotten the plant from Toledo Bend but is just as close to Caddo as the larger lake.

“We’ve had a mild winter and there is a lot of salvinia in Caddo,” Wright says. “There is some salvinia at almost every boat ramp and it’s easy for people to get that on their boats or on the (trailer) runners when they’re loading the boat, We have signs at most of the ramps alerting people that it’s illegal to possess or transport it.”

Inspection is the only way to find the plant on your boat, Wright says, and owners should stop at the ramp and check before they leave the lake. Once you’re out of the parking lot, you’re illegal if you haven’t removed it from your craft.

Salvinia is a fairly hardy plant and can live out of the water for extended periods of time, which is why it should be removed immediately after loading your boat, he says.

“We do as much as we can but we’re limited, and we can’t watch every ramp on every lake,” Wright says. “We have to count on people to clear their boats before they go to a new lake.” Cold weather can slow down the rate at which giant salvinia spreads, Wright said, but it won’t kill every plant. Once water temperatures begin to inch toward 70 degrees in the late spring and early summer, the wind-blown plant can form giant mats that clog creeks and coves and can affect fish and other aquatic life.

Giant salvinia originally was imported into the United States for use as an ornamental plant to be used in aquariums. However, once it escaped into lakes and ponds, it has run rampant in many areas.

For more information on invasive species visit www.texasinvasives.org or the Inland Fisheries District 3A page on Facebook, www.facebook.com/tpwdifmarshall.