

Awareness about salvinia increases

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If we were Congressman John Fleming, we would be more than ready to flee to Washington to confront small problems like fixing the economy and eliminating the deficit.

Anything seems more do-able than eradicating Giant salvinia from southern lakes and waterways.

And yet, we appreciate our 4th District representative for bringing the light of congressional attention to this green scourge that threatens to choke the life out of environmental treasures such as Bistineau and Caddo lakes. In a nation financially stressed by three wars, large entitlement programs and mounting debt, competition will be formidable for federal resources.

Fleming, along with Texas Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Tyler, held a Monday hearing and then toured Caddo Lake, which straddles Louisiana's border with Texas. Their understanding of the scope of the infestation that can create blankets of green across a lake will be critical in educating Congress about the economic and environmental stakes.

Fleming actually said he felt encouraged by the information shared by experts, a growing body of research made possible by federal grants and the potential for public-private partnerships.

Fleming, who chairs the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs, said Tuesday that invasive species are a growing problem across the nation. Think boa constrictors slithering through the Everglades. Salvinia is part of a third wave of lake infestations, following problem plants such as hyacinth and hibiscus.

Anti-salvinia efforts have included lake drawdowns, voracious weevils and herbicide. All meet with some success, but none are a complete answer for a plant that not only can remain dormant but that travels easily. Salvinia bits cling to boat shells and outboard

motor props until a fisherman or skier puts into the next lake or river. Weevils must be reintroduced each spring since they can't survive the winter and herbicide is expensive, at one time running \$1,851 a gallon.

Each remedy can bring some trepidation about unintended consequences. Some tactics can prove downright controversial. One proposal in Lake Bistineau included cutting down bald cypress trees. The idea, from a specialist in the state Wildlife and Fisheries office, was to improve the flow of water passing through the lake and thus to flush out the salvinia. Also, thinning out some cypress stands would facilitate herbicide spraying. Not unexpectedly, eyebrows were raised in the Department of Natural Resources which couldn't find any legal cover for the Wildlife and Fisheries recommendation to allow the Louisiana state tree to be cut down, said one area state lawmaker.

Finding an actual use for salvinia, hasn't worked either, mostly because it is 95 percent water. That makes it impractical as a biofuel. Ornamental mulch? Every 100 pounds harvested would yield only 5 pounds for your garden. Same story for animal feed, plus salvinia has a metabolic inhibitor that makes it toxic to livestock.

So we're left with reliance on hard winters as the salvinia's worst enemy, but one we can't control. Weevils are second, but there's hope that research may yield another biological tool, such as some sort of salvinia-specific fungus.

Let's hope also that Reps. Fleming and Gohmert can translate their concern into federal support for eradication efforts, while ensuring that any strategies are firmly grounded in local and regional study and buy-in.