

Hydrilla being put in the lake, Corps fears

By SUSAN KYTE
Sun Staff Writer

Despite efforts to stem the spread of hydrilla in Kerr reservoir, USACE (US Army Corps of Engineers) officials continue to find new outgrowths of the invasive plant.

A 2014 survey of the lake estimated there were 1,116 acres of hydrilla, an increase of nearly 230 acres from 2013. The majority of that increase, approximately 214 acres, is located in the western part of the lake near Staunton View Park.

At first, they said they were stymied by the growth pattern. That was until a USACE official happened upon a fishing blog where an angler was touting the benefits of hydrilla to fish production. A perusal of hunting blogs, also turned up comments about how hydrilla benefits waterfowl hunters.

USACE Project Manager Michael Womack told a recent gathering of stakeholders looking to promote the recreational opportunities afforded by the lake that, after some research, his rangers and biologists concluded that most likely a small number of hunters and anglers intentionally bring hydrilla to the lake.

These outdoorsmen see hydrilla as a beneficial plant that affords a better breeding ground for fish and feeding ground for waterfowl.

"This view is shortsighted," Womack said. There is overwhelming evidence that shows that hydrilla cannot be contained or controlled. It overtakes and kills off native plants, cuts off sunlight to the water, diminishes oxygen levels needed for healthy fish and native plants, and can carry diseases that are deadly to certain waterfowl and the predatory birds that might eat them, like eagles.

Make no mistake, Womack said, "It is a crime in Virginia to knowingly or unknowingly spread noxious and invasive aquatic vegetation like hy-

See **HYDRILLA**, page A6

drilla," in the waterways. If USACE rangers catch a violator, Womack said his agency will pursue criminal charges.

In addition to their efforts to find violators, Corps officials believe the best way to stop the spread of hydrilla is by educating the public. As a first step, the rangers posted "nuisance aquatic plant warning signs at all public boat ramps."

Early public education efforts focused on informing boaters, hunters, and anglers of the importance of cleaning boats, trailers, and other equipment to avoid spreading hydrilla. Rangers and Corps biologists say the best way for the "unintentional" violator to stop the spread of hydrilla is to check the bottom and sides of their boat or motor for signs of the plant, before leaving the boat ramp. If the plant is discovered, don't throw it back into the lake, said Womack. Instead, place it in a trashcan, bin, or dumpster, so it won't get washed back into the lake.

Other educational efforts have also included the distribution of pamphlets about aquatic vegetation management. These are available at visitor centers, recreation area gatehouses and marinas. More information is available online at [www.saw.usace.army.mil/Locations/District-LakesandDams/JohnHKerr/Natural-](http://www.saw.usace.army.mil/Locations/District-LakesandDams/JohnHKerr/Natural-Resources/AquaticVegetationManagement.aspx)

[Resources/AquaticVegetationManagement.aspx](http://www.saw.usace.army.mil/Locations/District-LakesandDams/JohnHKerr/Natural-Resources/AquaticVegetationManagement.aspx).

In addition to education, last fall and in the spring of 2014, the Corps began introducing sterile grass carp into the lake to help curtail the spread of hydrilla. To date, more than 17,500 grass carp were stocked in the lake, at three locations.

These voracious herbivores, once referred to as lawnmowers with fins, eat the hydrilla. Unfortunately, their taste for grass does not stop with the hydrilla, and left unchecked the carp can and will consume non-invasive and native grasses. Therefore, the Corps, working with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, is monitoring the targeted vegetation and fish populations.

Womack said it is too soon to judge the efficacy of this program. He expects to report the first results in 2015.

Since aquatic vegetation is crucial to creating and maintaining a healthy fishery - particularly for largemouth bass, crappie and other species - the USACE's aquatic vegetation management program, completed in June 2013, encouraged the corps to install selected species of native vegetation to displace the hydrilla. These "founder colonies" would be planted in exclusion cages to protect the plants from destruction by the carp and other herbivory.

USACE officials are completing the plans for planting a pilot project.

Due to the sensitive nature of these activities private individuals and organizations are not permitted to bring sterile grass carp to the lake or plant aquatic vegetation. However, individuals and organizations interested in donating funds or willing to assist with native vegetation planting efforts are encouraged to contact the USACE for information on how to contribute to these activities.

The local USACE offices are located at 1930 Mays Chapel Road, Boydton, VA 23917, or they can be reached by phone at (434) 738-6101 or emailed at JHKERR@usace.army.mil.



As proof that the USACE is serious about stopping the spread of hydrilla they implemented the Corps Watch program which provides a \$1000 reward for information leading to the arrest and prosecution of individuals causing damage to USACE property including the intentional spread of federally listed noxious weeds including hydrilla, unauthorized application of pesticides, and unauthorized release of fish including grass carp.