

Weed harvester deemed a success for curly leaf removal

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Weeds were once so much of a nuisance on Sauk Lake in the late 1980s that it was said a person could walk across the lake. While they produced a good habitat for fish, the abundance of weed beds made it difficult for navigation for shoreland owners.

In 1990 the city of Sauk Centre petitioned the Sauk River Watershed District to purchase a weed harvester with the Army Corp of Engineers (ACOE) paying for 75 percent of it. The remaining 25 percent was assessed to benefited landowners.

While the harvester cleared navigation paths for boats to get to and from shore, by 2003 Curly Leaf Pondweed became a nuisance because of high phosphorous levels and the city once again petitioned the watershed, who ended up harvesting 242 acres, much more than the 62 acres of water in the first go-round.

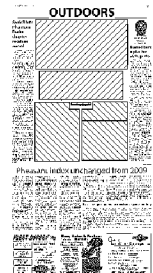
It was all part of a vegetation management plan, and while some anglers believe it has caused habitat issues for fish, the watershed district has vowed the project a success.

“There’s been a lot of misconceptions and debate about harvesting too much or not enough,” said Holly Kovarik, Sauk River Watershed District Administrator.

The harvester usually operates about 35 days per year between May and June, although in recent years it hasn’t been used as much because the weed issue has all but been resolved. In the years of operation, the harvester hauled 140 loads per season, totaling approximately 1,000 pounds of vegetation per load. The machine can harvest six feet deep and clear a 9-foot path.

Kovarik said it depends on what part of the lake one is referring too as the north end still has an abundance of weeds. But she said the Curly Leaf Pondweed has been significantly reduced, which helps improve water quality.

“We don’t want to do anything that is unnecessary,”



said Kovarik. "The harvester is getting used mainly in areas of concern."

The City of Sauk Centre is assessed by the watershed for its use on Sauk Lake. That assessment is passed on to property owners. The city can either reassess the amount or pay it directly. At the time the project began the council decided to pay the assessment on behalf of the citizens and include it in the levy rather than reassess individually. Any excess funds collected by the watershed is set aside for future maintenance and replacement of equipment.

However, because the harvester has not been used much in years past, the watershed district decided not to assess the city in 2011. Kovarik said the harvester project has served its purpose, especially in ridding the lake of phosphorous-laden Curly Leaf Pondweed.

"We're seeing very little of it," she said. "We'll continue to monitor the situation. But the last two to three years the curly leaf has dwindled and that can be attributed to the success of the project."



The weed harvester operates on Sauk Lake around 35 days between May and June at its peak use, but has been used sparingly recently due to the success of the project. PHOTO COURTESY OF SAUK RIVER WATERSHED DISTRICT