Fighting hydrilla

Spraying Henderson Lake expected to take six to eight weeks

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Outdoors Editor

HENDERSON — The battle to stamp out 80 percent of Henderson Lake's hydrilla has begun. The troublesome aquatic plant has had a chokehold on the popular St. Martin Parish fishing hole for three years.

Surface application of the chemical Avast began Thursday and will continue until the entire lake has been treated. The surface spraying is expected to take six to eight weeks. On Monday, the second phase of the battle plan begins with aerial spraying on the 55,000-acre lake.

Henderson Lake has been treated. The hydrilla problems became serious in summer 1999, when more than 75 percent of the lake was matted over with the aquatic plant. Two years of drought only made matters worse.

Workers of Griffin Co. use an airboat Friday to spray Avast, an herbicide, into Henderson Lake near the Dog Leg Canal area. The spraying kicked off an $850,000 state-funded program to control the troublesome aquatic weed. The LSU AgCenter will oversee the project.

Craig Smith, a representative for Griffin, the Florida-based company that manufactures Avast, said the process is done by dispersing the chemical in a time-release manner. The process is slow enough, he said, that there shouldn't be any problems with low oxygen content, a major cause of fish kills.

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The beauty of the project is that contractor ChemSpray guarantees an 80 percent kill, Romero said. "I'm also glad we're finally getting this under way, because now maybe I can get my sofa back," Sheriff (Charles) Fuselier has been camped out on it for weeks."

Fuselier said he's seen the lake deteriorating and, as the tax collector, knows its value to the parish. "This would have been a great loss to St. Martin Parish if we would have let the lake go like it was," Fuselier said. "Besides, the lake is a great asset, not just to the parish, but all of Acadiana. Every time I see kids out here fishing, I know it's better than having them on the streets."

Signs have been posted at the public and private landings on the lake notifying the public of the spraying. The surface application phase of the project is done by dispersing the chemical from beneath an airboat. A fixed-wing aircraft will do the aerial application by dropping pellets of Avast into the lake.

"We're asking the public to stay away for the areas where the aerial spraying is being conducted," said Charles Deville of ChemSpray. "We're not worried about the public being hurt by the chemical itself, but from being pelted by the pellets."

Smith said Avast works by stopping the plant's cells from generating food.

"We are attacking the plant in two ways," Smith said. "The surface application gets the Avast to the plant right away, while the pellets settle to the bottom and work in a time-release manner."

Smith said it will take a couple of months before the hydrilla really begins to die off. The process is slow enough, he said, that there shouldn't be any problems with low oxygen content, a major cause of fish kills.