Henderson level not drought, but weed-control plan

By JOE MACALUSO

Have you crossed Henderson Lake on 1-10 lately? Lots of folks who have are seeing something they’ve never seen before, and have made lots of follow-up phone calls.

Except for the deepest bayous and canals, Henderson Lake is dry.

What’s more, state fisheries biologists hope it will stay dry for another four months.

Most folks think the dried condition of the 5,000-acre backwater lake is because of the 21-month long drought. Though the drought helped, drying up the lake’s flats and the banks of bayous and canals is a plan by state biologists to control hydrilla.

The non-native aquatic grass was growing on more than 70 percent of the lake’s waterbottom. In concert with the St. Mary Parish Police Jury, the water-level control structure on the south end of the lake was opened to drain the lake of as much water as possible.

Department of Wildlife and Fisheries’ Inland Fisheries administrator Bennie Fontenot said the control structure will remain open at least through the end of the year.

“We needed to do something,” Fontenot said. “The grass was taking over every inch it could on Henderson Lake.”

It’s not the first time the lake has been dry. Fisheries biologist Charlie Dugas said the history of the lake is replete with wet and dry cycles.

“Because it’s a backwater area, it would rise and fall with the rise and fall of the Atchafalaya River,” he said.

“It’s only been since the early 1960s when gates were built to hold in the water that Henderson stays wet all year.”

The gates have been opened before, but not recently. This time controlling hydrilla is the reason the water levels were dropped. Hydrilla is an ornamental plant introduced from Asia into Florida in the 1960s for use in aquariums. The plant can grow from clippings, and when it reached warm, Florida waterways, it began to grow and move to other states. It has been a major problem in Louisiana’s vast warm, shallow waters since the early 1990s.

Hydrilla grows rapidly and has taken over areas of the Atchafalaya Spillway and the Belle River area.

Dugas said there are several ways to control the infestation and spread of the plant. He talked about a herbicide spraying program, the use of grass-eating carp and a project to dry lake bottoms. Dugas said a combination of all three works.

“Herbicides are expensive, and we cannot guarantee that the grass carp will stay in the lake,” Dugas said.

So, the Fishes staff settled on the third alternative.

“We know, through research, that we have to drain lakes in the late summer so that by the fall, when daylight is less than 12 hours each day, we can break hydrilla’s life cycle,” Dugas said.

“When the days shorten, the plant starts to send tubers into the soil so that when cold weather comes, the plant will survive. Tubers can last for five years, maybe longer, in the soil. The idea is to kill the adult plants so they don’t set tubers.”

To further reduce the number of hydrilla tubers still growing in 2000 in the lake bottom, Fontenot and Dugas said the process of drying the lake bottom might have to occur again next year.

“We know one year will not control the hydrilla. The drought has helped it pretty hard in this drawdown, but if we could do it again next year, it would further reduce the tubers,” Dugas explained.

Whether that will happen is uncertain. Several boat launching sites and tourist-boat businesses operating along Henderson Lake’s western levee have been forced to shut down because of the low water.

“We know that if we don’t follow it (the drawdown) with other management plans — using herbicides or another drawdown — then we will not accomplish much. I think the best thing we can do is another drawdown,” Dugas said.

While decreasing hydrilla is the main objective, Dugas and his fellow biologists agree the drawdown will help the fish stocks.

“When water sits in an area like this for so many years, the bottom gets mushy. Bass, crappie and bluegill like to spawn on hard bottoms,” Dugas said. “In recent years, we’ve seen these fish had to wait for a rise in the lake to move to the levees to spawn.

“The drawdown will make 90 percent of the 5,000 acres suitable for spawning. That’s why it’s good for fish.”

He said the sunlight also helps oxidize organic matter on the lake bottom, which stimulates plant growth. That, in turn, provides a good food base for crawfish, which are a good source of food for the gamefish.

As for other effects on wildlife, Dugas said duck hunters will be disappointed because of the low water, but added that ducks have already been seen in the area.

“We would like the lake to stay dry until Jan. 15, and if we’re successful with this plan, we believe Henderson again will be one of the best lakes in the state,” Dugas said. “We have old data that shows Henderson was right up with the best lakes in the country before the gates were put in.

“This (drawdown) could be one of the best things that has happened in this lake in a long time,” he said.

ABOVE: Since August, travelers along I-10 between Baton Rouge and Lafayette have been seeing a unusual view of Henderson Lake. Except for deeper bayous and canals, the lake is dry, and state biologists hope it will stay dry until January. The drawdown is an attempt to control hydrilla, a non-native aquatic grass that had taken over the lake since 1995.

LEFT: An oil platform sits in the middle of a canal off the main bayou in Henderson Lake. Usually the platform is in the middle of a 5,000-plus acre lake.