Weed-gobbling weevils turned loose in Cameron

CAMERON (AP) - After a year of testing to make sure they don't eat any native plants, weed-eating weevils have been turned loose to attack an invader that threatens to choke canals and lakes.

Giant salvinia, which can quickly grow several feet thick on the water's surface, was first found in Toledo Bend in 1998. This year, it was found in canals, ponds and bayous north of the town of Cameron.

Hoping to nip it in the leaf, the LSU Agriculture Center released imported weevil larvae this week in the Cameron area.

The larvae have been stringently tested and should pose no new pest problem, officials said.

Like giant salvinia, the weevils are originally from Brazil. They're the plant's natural predator and eat only giant and common salvinia, said Seth Johnson of the AgCenter's Department of Entomology.

He said the weevils, imported from Australia, were tested on other native plants before a federal laboratory licensed their release.

The AgCenter's Dearl Sanders, who flew in a helicopter over the infested area, found a widespread problem.

"I saw it in a lot more places than it was thought to be originally," Sanders said.

He estimated the plant, in patches, probably covers 12 to 25 square miles.

Giant salvinia could create an economic and environmental disaster if left unchecked. Not only would it harm streams and lakes, it could also clog rice irrigation ditches and even compete for space in rice fields, Sanders said.

It can grow so thick that ponds and waterways become devoid of oxygen. Other plants die, and fish flee if they can, Sanders said.

Sanders said one question about the tropical weevil is whether it can live through the Louisiana winter.

"If it survives a month or two, we'll be pretty good," Sanders said. "We are hoping it is going to solve the problem."

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