NEWS

GUADALUPE-BLANCO RIVER AUTHORITY
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GBRA WILL EXAMINE MECHANICAL HARVESTER OPTION

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SEGUIN-At today's meeting of the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority Board of Directors, GBRA trustees gave general manager Bill West authorization to negotiate and develop a Cooperative Aquatic Vegetation Management Contract for the acquisition and operation of a mechanical vegetation harvester (MVH).

West said preliminary discussions have been underway for several weeks among the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA), Friends of Lake McQueeney (FOLM), Sportsman Conservationists of Texas, Inc. (SCOT), and Angler's Group (AG), with other groups possibly becoming involved during the contract development process. Participants would each contribute a portion of the cost of the MVH.

"Our goal is to obtain and use an MVH for a long enough period of time to adequately evaluate its effectiveness in helping to control hydrilla and other nuisance plants in Coleto Creek Reservoir and the smaller hydro lakes in the Guadalupe River basin, as well as some of the LCRA lakes in the Colorado River basin," said West. "We also need to develop accurate operating and maintenance costs for this area of Texas."

In recent years, Texas has experienced an infestation of the non-native aquatic plant hydrilla. With a growth rate of up to one inch a day, hydrilla can rapidly take over lakes and rivers, choking out native plants and preventing public access and use of these water bodies.

A variety of methods are currently being used to control hydrilla including the application of aquatic herbicides, sterile grass carp that feed on the plant, substrate mats that cover the river or lake bottom to block growth, mechanical vegetation harvesters, and an experimental 'hydrilla fly' whose larvae may be able to eventually control hydrilla by feeding on its leaves. West said GBRA intends to address the management of current aquatic plant problem areas in the Guadalupe River basin with the most appropriate means for the situation.

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According to West, no single method is completely effective and each has advantages and disadvantages. Despite extensive testing and EPA-approval of aquatic herbicides, there have been concerns raised in the public arena about what is a safe level of application. Sterile grass carp are limited by TPWD permit to 'closed' water systems such as ponds and self-contained lakes. Substrate mats are most effective in still bodies of water, not flowing river systems. And MVH's are expensive to operate, difficult to maneuver in small areas, and can spread hydrilla from plant cuttings.

"For these reasons, most agencies and river authorities promote a balanced approach, often referred to as integrated pest management (IRP), in order to maintain the delicate balance between vegetation and aquatic life required for a healthy lake. In the GBRA hydro lakes, a combination of EPA-approved aquatic herbicides plus TPWD's special permit for a one-time stocking of sterile grass carp produced excellent results," said West.

West believes the only way to determine whether or not an MVH should be added to the local hydrilla treatment options is to give it a 'real world' test in the Guadalupe River basin. "We need a longitudinal study, not just a one or two day demonstration, in order to fairly evaluate the effectiveness of this equipment. Can it keep up with the growth of the plant? What will it cost as compared to other treatment options? Will the clippings returned to the lake promote regrowth further downstream with potential damage to currently healthy fisheries? We need answers to these and other questions before a final decision can be made about permanently adding MVH's to our hydrilla treatment arsenal," said West.

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