

News from the Watershed

Hydrilla: A menace to our waterways

Have you ever been out on the lake and realized that your good fishing spot has been consumed by vegetation? Now that favorite spot is difficult to get to because of the huge mass of plants that have taken over. In addition, the fish are no longer living there because the oxygen is being used up by the plants. The culprit may very well be Hydrilla, an invisible menace until it fills the lake and “tops out” at the surface.

Hydrilla, which is native to Africa, Australia and parts of Asia, is considered to be the most problematic aquatic plant in the nation. It was introduced to Florida in the 1960's as an aquarium plant. Soon after its introduction to the sunshine state, it spread very rapidly. By the early 1970s it was established in major water bodies of all drainage basins in the state. Today, according to the University of Florida, Hydrilla is found in all Gulf Coast states, Atlantic Coast States as far north as Maryland and Delaware, and in the western states, California, Washington and Arizona.

One of the reasons Hydrilla is such a problematic species is its ability to reproduce so rapidly and easily. Although a major pest, Hydrilla is a very efficient plant. It can reproduce in four ways: fragmentation, tubers, turions and seed. It can sprout new plants from root or stem fragments. Under ground, Hydrilla produces tubers, potato like objects, which each start a new plant. These tubers may remain dormant for years before they begin to grow new plants. Buds from the plant, called turions, will separate from the adult plant and start new plants wherever they settle. And finally, the seeds of this pesky plant can spread, producing additional plants wherever they land.

The plant's amazing reproductive capabilities allow it to grow in most freshwater bodies. It has a wide tolerance for water temperature (68-86 F). The plant is composed of approximately 90% water, which means it can produce new growth easily in water with limited or high volumes of nutrients. In addition, it can elongate rapidly, up to one inch per day, to reach the sunlight at the water's surface. Once it reaches the water's surface, it branches out and produces more stems. This reduces the amount of required sunlight reaching other submersed plants. Hydrilla does not need as much light to photosynthesize as other vegetation. This aids the plant by allowing it to begin the photosynthesis process earlier in the morning and also to grow in deeper water than other aquatic vegetation.

Hydrilla is causing major problems all over the United States. The plant impacts water bodies in many ways. It reduces flow in drainage canals, which can result in flooding. It slows flow and clogs pumps for landowners utilizing irrigation canals. It can cause buildup in culverts, which may affect pumping stations. It impedes navigation for recreational and commercial activities. It affects activities such as swimming and fishing. It displaces native vegetation and causes fish kills. And Florida spends millions of dollars a year on treatment of this exotic plant in an effort to control it.

What steps can you take to help stop the spread of Hydrilla and other non-native pests? The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Coast Guard offer the following suggestions:

- Before leaving any body of water, it is important to examine all your equipment, boats, trailers, clothing, boots, buckets etc and: Remove any visible plants, mud and dirt. Make sure to remove them at the site and not at your home.
- Much of the recreational equipment used in water contains many spots where water can collect and potentially harbor these aquatic hitchhikers. Thus, make sure that you: Eliminate all water

from every conceivable item before you leave the area you are visiting. Remove water from motors, jet drives, live wells, boat hulls, scuba tanks and regulators, boots, waders, bait buckets, seaplane floats, and swimming floats.

- **Aquarium and Aquatic Pets:** If your family gets tired of its aquarium or aquatic pets, do not release anything from the aquarium (water, plants, fish or animals) into or near a body of water or storm drain. Explain to your children how you could be hurting all of the streams and lakes around the country and killing other fish and animals that already live in the water.

Highlands County has its share of challenges with Hydrilla. We all want to enjoy our beautiful lakes and waterways; and by following these simple steps, you can help with the control of this invasive plant. For more information on how you can get involved in protecting our lakes and watersheds, contact the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District office at (863) 402-6545.