

SMITH MOUNTAIN LAKE

CARP PLANS CATCH ANGLERS' ATTENTION



JEFF REID, THE FRANKLIN NEWS-POST | FILE 2025

Tennessee angler Nick Hatfield lands a fish in May during the Championship Round of the B&W Trailer Hitches Heavy Hitters All-Star Tournament at Smith Mountain Lake.

There are concerns over how new carp could impact fishing

JASON DUNOVANT
The Roanoke Times

The Tri-County Lakes Administrative Commission will make a decision next month that could have far-reaching ramifications on the future of recreational fishing at Smith Mountain Lake.

Plans are underway to stock as many as 1,300 sterile grass carp into Smith Mountain Lake this spring. The goal is for the carp to devour the fast-spreading invasive hydrilla spreading in several areas of the lake.

The aquatic weed started appearing last year in areas of the Blackwater River arm of the lake. The largest amounts are in the lake's Bull Run and Little Bull Run sections, where hydrilla grew to several acres over the summer, making recreation such as boating or even swimming difficult for people living on the shore.

"We couldn't swim at our dock at all last summer," said Marshall Prillaman, a lakefront property owner who lives on Little Bull Run. "And you can't run a boat through it."

Prillaman, like many lakefront property owners where the hydrilla growth is worst,

want to see TLAC stock sterile grass carp to eat up the plants — their favorite food source.

There's just one problem: sterile grass carp have been introduced into Smith Mountain Lake before, and it didn't go perfectly.

In 2013, TLAC stocked 6,000 sterile grass carp into the lake. The carp ate all the hydrilla but then quickly moved on to devour every other piece of aquatic vegetation.

Aquatic plants can be a useful tool in fishing. Fish such as bass, which are popular at Smith Mountain Lake, often use vegetation as cover. Anglers know that an underwater patch can often be the best place to reel in a fish.

Local anglers know hydrilla is back, and they see it as a win for recreational fishing that could make the lake even more popular as a fishing destination.

Anglers are pushing TLAC to hold off on any decisions to stock more carp. Many of them question if the move is necessary, fearing it could remove all aquatic vegetation in the lake for another decade.

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Carp

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"It's in a small area right now," said Chad Gilmore, president of the Smith Mountain Striper Club. "Why would we put in grass carp that are gonna go anywhere and everywhere? They are going to eat not only the hydrilla, but all the other vegetation."

What happened last time?

Sterile grass carp were first stocked at SML in 2013 after years of TLAC trying unsuccessfully to stop hydrilla from spreading. The weed was first discovered in the lake in 2007 — just the latest body of water at the time to be infected after hydrilla began spreading through the U.S. in the 1950s.

Hydrilla, originating in Asia, is believed to have first been dumped from an aquarium into waterways in Florida.

By 2012, hydrilla was found in 10 locations on the Blackwater River arm of the lake with concerns it could spread to more. The vegetation is known for easily spreading, taking root anywhere and being nearly impossible to completely eradicate.

TLAC first tried using herbicide. The treatment was costly and only killed the hydrilla for a short time. The weeds would always return the next year and continue spreading.

Herbicide treatments for hydrilla and other invasive vegetation cost TLAC more than \$400,000 between 2002 and 2013, with each year getting more expensive than the last as the hydrilla grew. In 2012 alone, the commission spent \$150,000 to treat 189 acres.

TLAC stocked 6,000 sterile grass carp in the lake in 2013 to eliminate the fast-spreading hydrilla. The cost to stock the carp was \$32,000.

Those 6,000 carp successfully eliminated every trace of hydrilla in only a few months, but the fish were still hungry. Along with the hydrilla, the carp ate every bit of native aquatic vegetation in Smith Mountain Lake and have prevented any from returning.

A consequential decision next month

Now, after more than a decade, the sterile grass carp are slowing down. At 13 years, the fish are nearing the end of their lifespan and are starting to die off. Hydrilla is back, and so are native plants.

TLAC is looking to curb hydrilla's growth before it continues to spread into other areas of Smith Mountain Lake. Late last year, the commission board started planning to introduce as many as 1,300 sterile grass carp back into the lake this May as hydrilla grows back.

The plant dies out in the late



HEATHER ROUSSEAU, THE ROANOKE TIMES | FILE 2025

Hydrilla, an invasive aquatic plant, is quickly making its return at Smith Mountain Lake after more than a decade. The underwater weed is seen at a cove at the lake in Penhook in September.

fall only to return again in the summer.

TLAC Chairman Edgar Tuck agrees that 6,000 was far too many carp in 2013. 1,300 is the maximum this time, with hopes of maintaining some of the lake's native vegetation that is slowly returning to benefit anglers.

The commission board is expected to make a final decision on the number of carp at its April meeting. Tuck expects some amount of carp will be introduced.

"I can assuredly say it will not be zero," he said.

TLAC's goal, according to Tuck, is to stock a limited amount of carp this year. A survey of the lake will be conducted in the fall to see how effective the carp were, with plans to stock more carp next year if needed.

Gilmore said the latest estimate from TLAC is that a total of 15 acres of hydrilla have been discovered so far. At 1,300 carp proposed, that would be 86 fish per acre — an amount he considers overkill.

What are anglers' concerns?

Jon Anderson, vice president of the Smith Mountain Striper Club, questions how officials came up with the 1,300 number. He believes the TLAC board decided on an arbitrary amount after some conversations between members.

"Where is the science?" Anderson asked. "There was no math put forward."

There are also other concerns that removing the aquatic vegetation could decrease the lake's fish population. Young fish often use plants to hide from predators. Removing them could give young fish less cover and possibly reduce the overall population.

Billy Kohls, a local fishing guide, said efforts have been ongoing for more than a decade between local anglers and the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources to stock a special breed of bass known as F1 tiger bass. They grow faster and larger than other bass and make SML even more

attractive to anglers.

"The reputation of this lake is on a massive upswing," Kohls said, and removing vegetation could stunt that program's growth.

Smith Mountain Lake hosted a Major League Fishing tournament last year. It was the first time professional anglers have fished at the lake since 2010.

Hosting those types of events helps promote Smith Mountain Lake as a fishing destination. Anglers visit the lake, shop at its stores, eat at its restaurants and sometimes hire fishing guides like Kohls.

Kevin Tosh, director of tourism for Franklin County, said the Major League Fishing tournament brought nationwide attention to the lake. The online broadcast drew more than 1 million live views and 27 million minutes watched, the second most in Major League Fishing history, Tosh said.

The event also had more than 12 million social media impressions and was featured in six, two-hour television specials on the Discovery Channel. A highlight show of the tournament was also featured on CBS this past December.

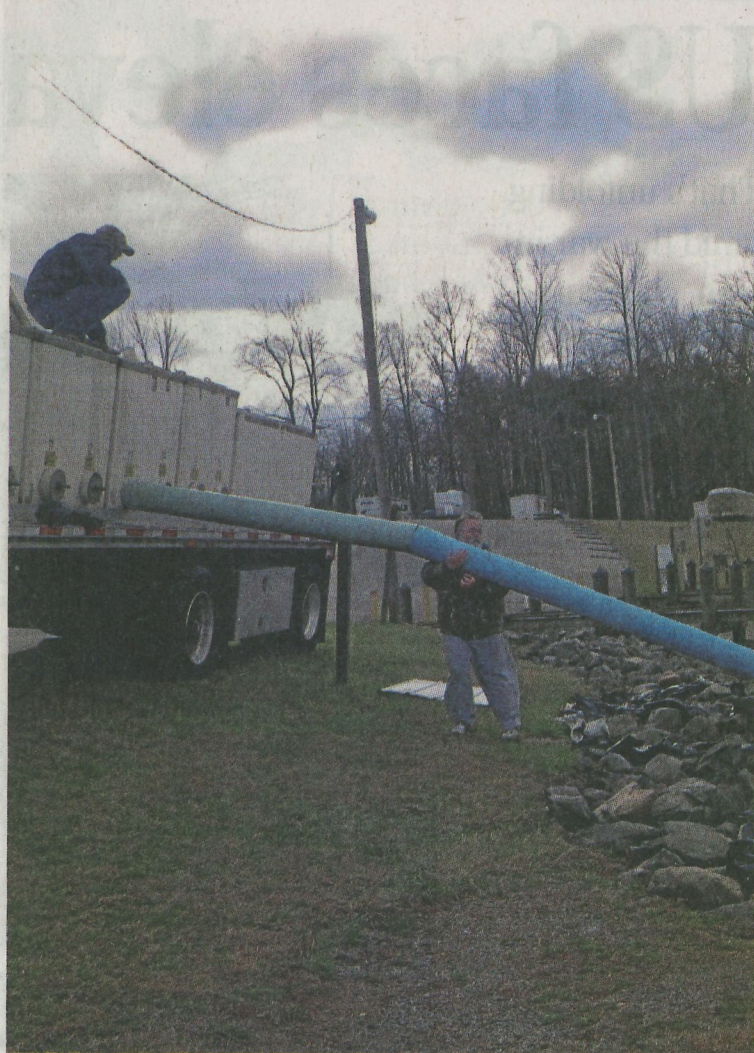
Major League Fishing was the biggest of multiple of fishing tournaments held at SML in recent years from a variety of local and regional leagues.

Kohls said removing vegetation will not only impact fish populations but will make fishing less enjoyable for visitors. Aquatic vegetation is often a surefire way to catch a fish. Without vegetation, locating a large bass can be more difficult, which could result in fewer people visiting Smith Mountain Lake to fish.

Balancing risks of hydrilla, carp

Prillaman doubts adding additional sterile grass carp later this year will have any significant impacts on fishing at Smith Mountain Lake. He said anglers' concerns are overblown.

"Those 6,000 carp lasted 12 years and I didn't see anyone



THE ROANOKE TIMES | FILE 2013

Crews stocked 6,000 sterile grass carp into Smith Mountain Lake in 2013. The carp were delivered by truck and drained into the lake.

complaining that they were not catching enough fish," said Prilaman, who has lived on the lake for 40 years.

He also questioned why anglers should have any say in this debate, as it is the lakefront property owners who are the most impacted. He also claims that lakefront property owners pay much more into the surrounding counties than anglers do.

"I don't think fisherman who aren't paying property taxes should have any say in this," Prilaman said.

Dan Wilson, a fisheries biologist with the DWR, agrees that removing vegetation could make fishing more difficult, but he doesn't see the removal of aquatic vegetation as having a major impact on fish populations. He also admits that hydrilla is not harmful to Smith Mountain Lake other than impacting recreation such as swimming and boating.

The biggest concern is how quickly it can spread. Wilson said that, if left unchecked, it could eventually spread into large patches on shorelines all over the lake.

Wilson said the hydrilla can grow in the lakebed as far as 20 feet deep; more if the water is clear enough to allow sunlight in the deeper water. Eventually, the lake's entire shoreline would be at risk.

"If nothing is done at all, no grass carp, no herbicides, no nothing, the lake is just left alone,

it will continue to expand," Wilson said, adding that the hydrilla could eventually reach all corners of the lake if left unchecked for several years.

TLAC is required to get approval from the DWR to stock the sterile grass carp. Once the board decides on a number next month, TLAC must apply for a permit from DWR to purchase and stock the fish.

Anderson said TLAC should consider moving back to using herbicide to control the hydrilla. He questioned why carp should be used to treat hydrilla, which is only present in the lake a few months out of the year.

"We know the hydrilla is not present year round, why are we using carp that eat year round?" Anderson asked, adding that the carp would quickly move to eating other vegetation in the lake.

Anglers are asking TLAC not to add any sterile grass carp into Smith Mountain Lake. Gilmore said the carp are a solution that can't be taken back once stocked in the water.

Once stocked, carp could potentially have serious negative impacts on fishing at Smith Mountain Lake for the next decade, anglers warn. That could mean fewer fishing tournaments, fewer visitors and less revenue for surrounding counties.

"I really think the brakes need to be pumped on this," Gilmore said.

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