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CARPetbaggers; The appearance of several species of Asian carp in Louisiana waters has scientists worried and sparked questions over who will supervise potentially invasive species
By Aaron Kuriloff; St. Bernard/Plaquemines bureau

The 15 large, unfamiliar fish that showed up in Harry Roberts' nets along the Mississippi River near Kenner last month weren't the catfish that pay his rent. And when a local biologist identified them, Roberts became worried about more than his lost catch.

According to the Tulane University scientist, Hank Bart, the commercial fisherman had netted a school of bighead Asian carp, natives of Chinese rivers known for their huge size, their voracious consumption of foods essential to local freshwater species and their habit of leaping from the murky depths toward motion, lights and boaters unlucky enough to be traveling the opposite direction.

Four species of Asian carp -- bighead, silver, grass and black -- have spread north along the river since escaping from fish farms in Mississippi and Arkansas more than a decade ago. But until recently, scientists had found few south of Arkansas.

"I done caught a little bit of everything out of that darned river, but I ain't never caught one of these things," Roberts said.

New legislation

State lawmakers also were getting acquainted with the species late last week, after the Senate sent a bill to Gov. Foster that would transfer supervision of fish farming from the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, which has limited the cultivation of nonnative species, to a new commission in the Department of Agriculture, which may pursue a more flexible policy.

Opponents of the measure say it opens dangerous holes in the state's efforts to control invasive species, allowing private investors to enrich themselves while paving incursion routes for animals that might prove as ecologically destructive as nutria or

Formosan termites.

The bill's supporters, however, say it could ease overly restrictive policies toward several marketable nonnative fish that, in many cases, already are swimming Louisiana waters.

"It's very disconcerting that (carp) populations are increasing," said Mark McElroy, a biologist and member of the governor's Invasive Species Task Force.

Flying fish

Asian carp caught the attention of Jerald Horst, a biologist with the Louisiana State University AgCenter's Sea Grant program, several years ago when an 8-pound specimen leapt toward his flashlight "like a huge silver bullet" and hit him at high speed in the temple.

"Biologists fear these things are going to eat huge amounts of plankton important for the larval stages of native commercial and sport fish," he said. "But the other fearsome thing about this fish is personal endangerment."

In central Louisiana, a thriving colony of invasive carp has boaters avoiding the Boeuf River after sunset, said Benny Champlain, who runs a net manufacturing business in Jonesville.

"You don't want to run the Boeuf at night very fast," he said. "These things get up to 50 or 60 pounds, and they can jump six feet out of the water. At 20 or 30 miles per hour, one of those things will knock you out of the boat."

Boaters in Illinois learned that lesson last summer, when an exploding population of Asian carp made headlines and wildlife managers began constructing a \$7 million electric barrier in the Illinois River to keep the fish from moving into the Great Lakes.

But the fish have proved very resilient. Since their escape from farms, where the plankton-eaters are used as low-cost natural cleaning systems before slaughter, they've migrated steadily north.

State biologists say they began turning up in Louisiana, which has restricted their use in farms, about five years ago.

With more than 64 million acres of freshwater river and bayou vulnerable to the fish, and farmers in neighboring states already cultivating tilapia and Asian carp, the state has almost no reason to restrict their commercial use, said Greg Lutz, an aquaculture specialist at LSU.

Council's creation debated

The council to be created by last week's legislation could ease Louisiana's restrictions, state Commissioner of Agriculture and Forestry Bob Odom said.

"If it's in the rivers and streams, why not use it to our advantage?" Odom asked.

But other state officials opposed creating an aquaculture council to regulate fish farms.

John Roussell, assistant secretary of the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, said the move would compromise his agency's mandate to protect Louisiana from dangerous invasive animals.

"The fundamental problem with the bill was the transfer of authority from Wildlife and Fisheries to Agriculture, and the loss of Wildlife and Fisheries' primary control over aquatic invasives," Roussell said.

Roberts caught a new batch of bighead carp Friday.

Louisiana residents have only one real weapon in the fight against the invaders, said Bart, curator of fishes at the Tulane University Natural History Museum, as he preserved a specimen for insertion in the collection.

"If we're going to live with these things, we better start eating them," Bart said. "It's an ecological last resort."

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