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New Non-Chemical Methods to Control Water Hyacinth Invasion in California

Oakland, CA — Researchers from the San Francisco Estuary Institute are testing new non-chemical methods of controlling the highly invasive aquatic plant water hyacinth. The project, conducted by the Aquatic Pesticides Monitoring Program (APMP), is the largest statewide effort to date to investigate the feasibility of mechanically removing the nuisance plant from Bay–Delta waterways and wetlands.

"What we learn from this project could help water resource managers throughout the state," says Program Manager Geoff Siemering. "This study will determine whether mechanical shredding can be a cost-effective alternative to the chemical pesticides currently in wide use for control of aquatic vegetation."

Considered by invasive plant experts to represent a significant threat to the Bay–Delta waterways, the water hyacinth grows in dense mats, and spreads rapidly with the aid of its free-floating leaves. In ideal conditions, water hyacinth grows faster than any known plant.

Ben Greenfield, an APMP scientist, set up the project, and coordinated studies to evaluate the environmental impacts of the method. "Mechanical shredding of large vegetation mats could have substantial environmental impacts, including reduced water quality and spreading of the hyacinth to new locations," says Mr. Greenfield. "We're monitoring water quality at both shredding locations to determine effects of the operation and our collaborators at UC-Davis will study whether fragments produced by the shredding can survive and reproduce."

The Monitoring Program will conduct tests on the non-chemical control of this aggressive aquatic invader at two project sites: Dow Wetlands Preserve in Pittsburg, and Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, 15 miles south of Sacramento. Custom airboats fitted with mechanical shredders will make their way through extensive stands of water hyacinth totaling over 100 acres at both sites. Planned demonstrations of these mechanical operations will be held at specific times detailed below.

“Dow is excited to be a partner in testing new methods to reduce the threat of invasive species in California’s waterways,” says Krist Jensen of Dow Wetlands. “Dow’s Wetland Preserve is a multiple-award-winning habitat that has been compromised by water hyacinth, and we’re eager to restore it to a fully healthy ecosystem.”

The Monitoring Program, which has an overall budget of $2.6 million over 2 years, was funded by the state in accordance with the terms of a settlement agreement with WaterKeepers Northern California. It was initiated in January 2002 with the goal of assessing the impact of pesticide applications on water quality statewide. The Program calls for a variety of sampling efforts and special studies to examine the behavior of pesticides in sediment, water and some organisms.

“It’s about time the state started to seriously study alternatives to spraying toxic chemicals into our waterways,” said Sejal Choksi, Pesticide Program Attorney for WaterKeepers. “These tests will help identify the environmental benefits and risks of mechanical shredding.”

The information gathered by the Program over the 2-year period, will be used by the state Board to develop a good general discharge permit for aquatic pesticide users and help establish standards to protect California's water bodies.

The San Francisco Estuary Institute, which administers the Aquatic Pesticide Monitoring Program, also conducts programs that provide environmental decision makers with vital information on watershed conditions, wetlands restoration, exotic species invasions, and long-term pollutant monitoring in the Bay. Partnering agencies on this project include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Dow Chemical Company, Vino Farms, and researchers at UC-Berkeley, UC-Davis, and CSU-Hayward.

Specific viewing opportunity:

Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge
Monday, September 8
10:00 – 12:30

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