

Asian carp remain in West Tennessee

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- Apr 7, 2021



Chip Matthews, left, and Angie Matthews prepare their boat on a chilly Friday morning at the Tellico Dam Reservation Boat Ramp.

Parker Wright | The Connection

Efforts to prevent the invasive Asian carp from entering Tellico and Watts Bar lakes are still underway, but some experts disagree on the best mode of action.

Timothy Joseph, Watts Bar Ecology and Fishery chairman, argues the Fort Loudoun Lock needs to be temporarily closed so a barrier can be placed, which would keep carp out of the lock. However, he is having difficulty gaining traction with public officials.

Joseph said the effort needs “powerful people” involved.

He said the economic impact of temporarily closing the lock is far less than the impact of not doing so due to the invasive fish's tendency to jump out of water, sometimes injuring water sports and recreation participants. The fish also negatively impact the ecology of the waters and can cause disruption to marine life.

"The only place they've been stopped is the St. Anthony's Lock for the very same reason," Joseph said. "They closed the lock because of the silver carp, and that stopped them. That's what we need to do at Watts Bar Lock. The difference is it just needs to be a temporary closure, but people don't understand that if they're thinking a temporary closure, 'Oh, that's going to be too much of an impact. It's going to be an impact on the barge industry,' which it will. But it amounts to a few million dollars a year. That's nothing compared to the over a billion dollars annually for the four lake region that's going to be economic loss that we're going to have when the carp get here, and that's fact. That's not speculation at all."

Joseph estimates it would take four to five years to construct the barrier. The lock would be closed during that time.

U.S. Rep. Tim Burchett, R-Tenn., has been receptive to ideas, but his support alone is not enough, Joseph said.

Carla Johnson, Tellico Village Property Owners Association board member and POA Asian Carp Committee member, agreed. She also highlighted Gov. Bill Lee's creation of the Asian Carp Advisory Commission, established in September.

Johnson is worried residents aren't taking the threat of invasion serious.

"I don't know if people understand the numbers of fish that we're talking about," she said. "It's hundreds of thousands. When they get in the waters, the problem is they eat at the bottom of the food chain, so it destroys the ecosystem, so the rest of the fish don't have anything to eat. You only end up with Asian carp."

Dennis Baxter, Tennessee Valley Authority River and Reservoir Compliance Monitoring manager, said TVA has been conducting a programmatic environmental assessment on all 10 dams and locks in the TVA system to determine the impacts, costs and benefits of various types of barriers. The effort will be available for public comment June 30-July 30.

Unlike Joseph, Baxter posits the fish need to be stopped where they are, placing emphasis on the locks farther west instead of Fort Loudoun.

"Right now the leading edge of Asian carp, the majority of the leading edge is at Pickwick Dam right now," Baxter said. "It's been there for the last year and a half. The high water last year and probably the high water this year is keeping them further down in the system. These Asian carp, they don't swim upstream like salmon. They're not going to come in droves and go hundreds of hundreds of miles. They will go upstream, but they're in a big school. Then when the numbers

get big, they sort of push over into the next area. They're not going to run like salmon, but they will move, but they will move slower. Right now, I know we have over 400 Asian carp tagged with radio transmitters. We're tracking where this leading edge is."

The state has also contracted some commercial fishermen to fish areas not known to house the carp to verify if they're in other waters.

Baxter said TVA is focusing on where the fish are, not where they're headed.

TVA doesn't recommend the temporary closure of the Fort Loudoun Lock, he said.

"The question is, just because one person said they saw a fish in Chickamauga is whether there's fish there," Baxter said. "I'm not saying he's right or wrong, but we searched for a whole year last year from Knoxville, Fort Loudoun and Melton Hill, down to Chickamauga looking for Asian carp. We didn't find any. That's not saying they're not there. But we know if they are there, they're very rare. So right now that would be no reason to shut down a lock even if we could."

Baxter was told the state could manage a few carp coming in at a time.

"I want to stop the leading edge from coming up because the remaining fish are insignificant, and the state said they could handle that, they can manage that," he said. "We just need to keep that leading edge downstream."

Johnson apologizes

At the Feb. 17 POA board meeting, Johnson misspoke about the number of fish being tagged.

She said there were 400,000 fish tagged, which was printed in the Feb. 24 edition of The Connection, while in reality the number is about 400.

During the March 17 board meeting, she publicly apologized for her error.