Trouble hits invasive weed battle

Budget issues could slow work that helps $1B-a-year contributor to state economy

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A program that has shown remarkable success at controlling a noxious, invasive weed choking the lower Connecticut River is on hold at least temporarily because of funding cuts by the federal government.

For nearly a decade, state and federal scientists have studied the pernicious aquatic weed hydrilla, looking for its vulnerabilities and studying the tidal ebbs and flows that have seeded it across 200 miles of the river and its tributaries in Connecticut.

Last summer, the research paid off. Armed with a federal budget and extensive survey work by scientists with the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began what turned out to be limited but highly successful herbicide applications. Parts of the river so choked by weed that boat traffic was stopped were clear within days.

Based on last summer's successful trials, the Army Corps planned to expand testing and increase the number of herbicide applications to about 16 locations in coming months. But project managers have learned that most of their funding was removed by a continuing congressional budget resolution earlier this spring and much of what remained is impounded by the White House budget office.

"No one wants this to happen," said Keith Hannon, Connecticut River project manager for the Army Corps. "So no one was really planning for it. We just have to respond. We are going to do what we can with what we have. That's the message for everyone to understand. We are still working."

Scientists for years have targeted hydrilla, a notoriously troublesome, invasive weed thought until very recently to have been confined to southern states, where it has clogged ponds and blocked rivers for decades. That changed in 2016, when amateur botanists found what they considered an odd weed growing in a river spur called Keeney Cove in Glastonbury.

Not only was the weed found to be hydrilla, but DNA testing revealed it to be a genetically unique strain not known elsewhere. In the years since, hydrilla has spread explosively to cover more than 1,000 acres of river and tributaries and jump, carried by the boats and trailers of anglers, to many of the state's lakes and ponds.

In addition to its effect on recreation and related business, such as marinas, hydrilla is crowding out native plant species along with the fish and other life those plants support. There is concern that the weed threatens the 70 years of environmental progress that has made the river a $1 billion-plus a year contributor to the state economy.

Survey work by the state Agricultural Experiment Station determined that the hydrilla infestation stretches north from the bottom of the river near Essex — it cannot tolerate salt water — to Agawam, Mass., just over the state border.

Last summer, after running tests with red-colored dye to chart river flow and the effect of tidal current, the army corps applied herbicides approved by state and federal environmental regulators to five sites between Glastonbury and Chester.

The result was stunning. One site, Selden Cove in Hadlyme, had been so densely congested that kayak paddlers couldn't paddle across it and fishermen couldn't sink a hook through it. The cove was clear in less than a week and marina owners were clamoring to have their properties treated.

The army corps had planned over this summer to continue potting current movement by introducing harmless dye to the water and, before September, obtain the environmental permits to apply herbicide to 16 locations, including three that were to be treated a second time after applications last summer.

Because of the budget cuts, Hannon said the army corps hopes to obtain permits to apply herbicide at Portland Boat Works, Chester Boat Basin in Chester, Selden Cove and Deep River. All but Deep Rover had been treated last summer.

"We had planned up to 12 new sites in Connecticut," Hannon said. "We were going to do rapid dye studies and follow low through with herbicide. It was all going to be permitted. Now we will move forward with three or four permits and will try to move forward on those sites."

The purpose of the work by the Army Corps and the Agricultural Experiment Station is not to eradicate hydrilla, but to develop guidance for government and private property owners that chose in the future to apply for permits to control

hydrilla themselves. It was unclear how or if the reduction in work scheduled for this summer will affect whatever report the army corps produces.

“It’s a national research project,” Hannon said. “So to have gaps in the data collection is really not ideal from a science perspective. So we are going to be able to continue it. It just is not going to have as many data points as we had hoped from this year.”

Hannon said the army corps could receive additional funding after September, but a public report on its work is now due sometime in the fall.

The first work on this years reduced summer schedule is now set for June near the Massachusetts border towns of Agawam and Longmeadow, in the area of the Six Flags New England amusement park. Hannon said the corps now suspects that is where hydrilla was introduced to the river, probably by someone who had become tired of the family goldfish and emptied an aquarium containing exotic, aquatic vegetation.

The Agawam-Long Meadow location is the northern terminus Connecticut River hydrilla infestation and, while the weed’s growth has expanded dramatically elsewhere, it has not spread farther north since the Agricultural Experiment Station began its survey about five years ago.That may be because the river flows only in one direction in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts is unaffected by the tides that cause the river to flow north and south below Hartford.

“It is really hard to know for sure,” Hannon said. “I’m a little reluctant to point any finger about where it came from. It really, literally could have come from someone who just dumped something in the river right there. But I don’t think it will ever be solved.”

In June, the Army Corps will be using dye to plot river flow close to the state border in order to determine how to best apply herbicide. There is some thinking that killing the weed upstream could ameliorate the downstream problem.

Connecticut’s effort against Hydrilla is directed by the state Office of Aquatic Invasive Species, which is part of the Agricultural Experiment Station. The office was created in 2022 in response to alarms raised by scientists with the Agricultural Experiment Station who began surveying hydrilla in the river after it was detected in Glastonbury.

The state office lacks the budget to conduct the kind of herbicide treatments contemplated by the federal army corps. But much of what the Army Corps is

doing is based on years of survey work by the state scientists.

Two members of the Connecticut Congressional delegation — Second District U.S. Rep Joe Courtney and Sen. Richard Blumenthal, both Democrats — argued for continued hydrilla funding and blamed Republican budget hawks in Congress and the White House for the reduction in the army corps budget.

“The Army Corps faces a funding shortfall because of the continuing resolution that the Republicans passed in March,” Blumenthal said. “As a result, the $5 million that the Army Corps was slated to get for ongoing demonstration work for hydrilla on the Connecticut River has been reduced, unfortunately, to about $2 million.

“As a result they have to curtail some of the work that was planned for this summer. But it will go forward and hopefully they will stretch the money to go farther and do as much with less. Of course, work done in Massachusetts affects Connecticut. But I am going to press for some of those resources to be used in Connecticut.”