

State clearing weedy water

South Lake job to end in 2 weeks

BY DAVE BERMAN
 FLORIDA TODAY

TITUSVILLE — An aquatic plant harvester has been plying South Lake just west of Titusville for the past month, scooping up floating islands of vegetation that have built up on the lake for decades.

The process, which should be completed within two weeks, will make the lake easier to navigate for fishermen and other boaters, and should improve the fishing there as well, state experts say. At 1,053 acres, South Lake is one of Brevard County's largest lakes. Lake Washington is more than 4,600 acres.

"It will improve the habitat of the lake," said project manager Ed Hayes, a biological scientist with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "This is preventive maintenance."

The project will help not only fish, but also the birds and turtles that call the lake home, Hayes said.

He said funding for the \$100,000 project comes from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's lake restoration budget. That budget, in turn, is funded by the state's Forever Florida program, derived from reve-

nue generated by the documentary stamp taxes paid as part of land transactions in Florida.

A five-person crew from Texas Aquatic Harvesting Inc., a private contractor hired by the state, is working the South Lake project, harvesting the floating islands of vegetation known as tussocks with a specially designed barge

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equipped with a ramp and a conveyor belt. The tussocks, some of which include trees and large bushes, are brought to shore, then trucked to a disposal site on nearby pastureland, under an agreement with the owner of the pastureland.

Bill Meredith, a Titusville resident who owns a home along South Lake and helped lead the effort to persuade the state to get the project started, said he sees "a definite improvement" in the lake conditions as a result of the tussocks removal work.

Meredith said he also has noticed more people fishing the lake, which contains such species as bass, carp and tilapia.

He cautions, though, that, with the existing state funding, only parts of the lake will be cleared of tussocks.

Meredith said he wants to see more work done in the future on the northeast and southeast sections of the lake, if funding becomes available.

Meredith and about 30 other homeowners met with Hayes in July, and received a preliminary commitment at the time that the tussocks would be removed within a year, after the required regulatory process was completed.

"Anything that's done to the lake to improve it, we're all for it," Meredith said.

Hayes said the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission typically does five or six tussocks-removal projects a year in lakes throughout the state.

The South Lake project, he said, has been going smoothly so far.

State experts will monitor conditions at South Lake over the next two years to see whether the harvesting solves the problem or the tussocks build up again.

"In some lakes, the tussocks come back quickly," Hayes said. "All lakes are different." ■

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Cleaning up. A crew from Texas Aquatic use a harvester to collect tussocks in South Lake near Titusville. The tus-

socks, some of which include trees and large bushes, are brought to shore, then trucked to a site on pastureland.