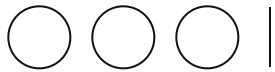


SHORELINE

Blumenthal: Invasive weed 'choking' Connecticut River

Josh LaBella

Updated: June 3, 2021 7:14 p.m.





Hydrilla is taking over the Mattabesset River at Cromwell Meadows.

Greg Bugbee, Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station Invasive Aquatic Plant / Contributed photo

MIDDLETOWN — Kelsey Wentling and her colleagues were kayaking in Mattabesset River when she said they found themselves surrounded by a weed that made it challenging to paddle out.

The weed was hydrilla, which grows in the warming months and has been spreading rapidly through the Connecticut River.

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

Wentling, a river steward at the Connecticut River Conservancy, and other experts say the problem with the invasive plant is growing each year, and it threatens to severely impact the ecosystem, recreation and economy of Connecticut and New England.

“This is, of course, an issue for those who rely on people coming to the river to

recreate,” Wentling said. “So businesses like marinas or restaurants — and also towns that are looking to develop or redevelop waterfronts in hopes of attracting tourists.”

Wentling said hydrilla, which grows out and fills large volumes of water, can impact the chemistry and temperature of the water where it grows.

“It pushes out the native species that we want there, and it’s not a suitable habitat for threatened migratory fish,” she said.

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

But experts who monitor and take care of the state’s waterways are banding together to curb the growth of hydrilla.

In a press conference in Middletown on Thursday, Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., and environmental experts urged the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee to commit \$100 million over the next four years to study and combat the weed.

“This river is choking on this weed,” Blumenthal said while standing on the shore of the Connecticut River. “It is the most feared and pervasive aquatic invasive species, because it is a new strain.”

BECAUSE IT IS A NEW STRAIN.

Blumenthal said the new genotype of hydrilla can grow several inches in one day and can spread uncontrollably. He said experts have seen the most growth from just above the Massachusetts border to Haddam, but added the river is the largest in New England and is crucial to the economy of four states.

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

“If we can develop means and tools to contain and eradicate it, it will be a national service,” he said.

Blumenthal later noted that public awareness was also an important component of the issue. He said some of the money would be spent informing the public about the threat hydrilla poses, and how it can spread to different waterways when boat or kayak owners do not wash their boats when taking them from place to place.

MORE FROM SHORELINE TIMES

SHORELINE

Madison proposes new elementary school, updates to 2 others

SHORELINE

Why critical race theory is being debated in Guilford and...

SHORELINE

Madison P&Z decision on The Ledges expected June 17

SHORELINE

Blumenthal: Invasive weed 'choking' Connecticut River

SHORELINE

Masks won't be required in Lyme-Old Lyme public schools...

SHORELINE

Pisani (opinion): Beware extraterrestrials in disguise

SHORELINE

Despite cost concerns, lawmakers OK tax breaks for shell...

Jim Arrigoni, a conservation biologist for the Connecticut Audubon Society, said it is not known where this new strain of hydrilla comes from, but the weed usually comes from Eurasia. He said the invasion of this weed is an issue because it is taking up the space of native species of plants.

“A native species that our native fauna have co-evolved with,” he said, mentioning waterfowl and fish eating birds as an example. “Hydrilla, likely, is not going to provide for the same dietary requirements. So, physiologically, it might not be killing animals, but it’s providing less quality sustenance for them.”

Hydrilla was not visible from the banks of the river on Thursday, but Arrigoni said two months of warmer days would allow passersby to see a carpet of it in the river. He said that could seriously impact the wildlife and plant life reliant on and living in the river over time.

Jeanne Davies, executive director of the Connecticut Resource Conservation and Development, said hydrilla first came on the radar of river experts in 2016, adding the organization gathered experts over the following years and has built a coalition of researchers to examine and discuss the issue.

During the process of that work, Davies said CTRCD created a documentary on the plant, and its potential impact on the Connecticut River. She said the plant could impact anything from fishing, to property values to recreation if it continues to grow at the pace it has been.

“I even had a hard time visualizing (hydrilla) until I was in it,” she said. “You can see how it chokes out everything. All you have to do is break a piece and its tubers go filtering off to re-propagate.”

Davies said the \$100 million that Blumenthal is pushing for will help the coalition work on the issue collectively.

“It will be challenging,” she said. “But you have science. You have willpower. You’ve got politics behind it.”

Sign up for the ShoreLine Times newsletter

Get the latest news and information from the ShoreLine Times.