

# Status of the Grass Carp Program in Texas

by  
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In January 1992, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission approved the use of certified triploid grass carp for vegetation control in Texas waters. Prior to that time, all grass carp were prohibited in the State. In general, the rules require a permit to possess the triploids, set the criteria for permit approval, allow only licensed Texas fish farmers who hold Exotic Species Permits to sell certified triploids, and continue the total prohibition of diploids in the State.

The recommendation of the Fisheries staff to approve the program was based on several considerations. Overabundant aquatic vegetation was and is a serious problem in small ponds over a large part of Texas. Weed infestations have reached levels that prevent use of some private waters by recreational fishermen. To a lesser degree, some public waters are also being negatively affected.

Under the previous law (total ban), the only practical options available to landowners to control aquatic weeds was either to use herbicides or introduce illegal diploid grass carp. Neither of these options benefit management of public waters. Herbicides, or their by-products, and illegal diploid grass carp eventually find their way into public waters. Both have the potential to cause long-term damage to aquatic environments.

Because herbicide treatment is expensive, the unlawful importation and introduction of diploids were occurring at an alarming rate. Diploid grass carp were being reported in many of our waters. Since the possibility of large populations of reproducing grass carp was our critical concern, we felt that replacing illegal diploids with sterile triploids would lessen the potential for long-term environmental harm.

Permitting triploids gave private pond owners an economic incentive to be legal and stop importing diploids.

Basically, the decision was whether to ignore the problem and assume it did not exist because grass carp were prohibited by law, or take a proactive approach and try to get some measure of control over what was entering the State. We chose the latter. The decision seems to have been a good one since recent surveys indicate for the first time that grass carp are reproducing in one of our rivers.

The rules as implemented did several things. First and foremost, they legalized the introduction of certified triploid grass carp in private waters by permit. Secondly, they set a permit fee of \$15 per application plus \$2 per individual fish. The funds generated in this "grass carp slush fund" were to be used to administer permit issuance and provide for technical assistance to private pond owners needed as a result of the program.

In the rules themselves, specific permit requirements and criteria are established. For instance, special consideration is given to areas that contain threatened or endangered species and to coastal areas. In most cases, applications from those areas are denied.

The new rules also emphasize that diploid grass carp are still totally prohibited. All triploids must come from out-of-state and must be certified by either the Fish and Wildlife Service or the State before shipping into Texas.

Texas fish farmers' concerns were addressed by allowing permitted landowners to buy triploids only from licensed Texas fish farmers.

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Texas fish farmers became the middle-men in all transactions, which allowed them to benefit from the activity.

Public waters were handled as a separate issue and were not covered under these new rules. The Department may allow stocking into public waters under another permit system. The same criteria for permit approval are applied to public water requests.

The permitting system implemented reflects a conservative approach. The maximum stocking rate routinely allowed is seven triploids per surface acre. Requests for rates above seven per acre are reviewed on an individual basis. Stockings are normally limited to 5-year frequencies, again unless a review indicates unusual circumstances require more frequent stockings. Under the system, stocking sites requiring less than 100 triploid grass

carp are inspected on a random basis. All application sites requiring 100 or more triploids per stocking are inspected before permit approval.

Since the program was implemented in 1992, nearly 2,900 permits have been issued for the use of triploids in private waters. Over 78,000 fish have been stocked. Although this level of activity is substantial, it is considerably less than originally projected.

In summary, the State of Texas allows the permitted use of triploid grass carp in private and public waters. The staff still considers diploids a long-term threat to our environment, particularly in estuarine areas. The decision to allow the permitted use of triploids was an attempt to lessen the illegal importation of diploids, which was occurring.