

Flint Lakes - Sucker Round Up!

The AIA Board received verbal and written concerns late last summer about the number of suckers in the lower Flint Lake. The species is invasive, not indigenous and is rapidly reproducing.

The Board worked with ranch property owners, Lucia Lebon and Will Hobson, the Division of Wildlife, and also conducted great deal of research into developing a solution. There were four possible solutions identified and “mitigation by manually removing suckers” was selected and agreed upon. This solution is the least expensive, the safest and the most environmentally-friendly, plus also has the least impact to the existing trout population.

During spawning season, in spring, the suckers migrate and churn towards the high end of the lake. Originally we planned to use small boats and cast nets or dip nets to remove the suckers. Ongoing removal would occur with normal fishing and a ‘no-return’ sucker policy. Luckily, during my contact with the DOW, we found there was a ‘win-win’ solution for our community and a local Gunnison businessman!

PJ, from Gunnison Masterbait, conducts removal both during the spawn and throughout the summer (while supplies last!). He’s already met with Will and Jim Matteson to discuss spawn timing and has committed to vast removal during the churn as well as on-going removal throughout the summer. There is no charge for this service, trout caught in cast or dip nets are safely returned and the vendor removes all fish to repurpose as frozen bait. He distributes frozen cut bait all over Southwest Colorado!

The solution will not completely eliminate all suckers from the lower lake, however, this controlled approach will improve the trout environment, ensuring the trout are less affected by the sucker invasion to become the prevalent and heartier species.

The abatement solution will be performed annually to further control and reduce sucker populations. The AIA will be scheduling trout stocking after the initial glut of those ‘little suckers’ are removed! For more detailed information, you can read the full report on the next page.

Happy Fishing! Becky
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Flint Lakes Sucker Infestation, Solutions & Update by Becky Stilley

Background:

Board received verbal and written concerns about the number of suckers in the lower Flint Lake. The species is invasive, not indigenous and is rapidly reproducing.

Mitigation Options:

- 1) Electric shock – Stuns large fish and then sucker removal commences with the trout population left to recover. Drawbacks: Loss of smaller trout and trout minnows/fingerlings.
- 2) Temporarily drain lake – All species are allowed to die and once water levels rise restocking of trout will commence. Drawbacks: Suckers are hearty and survive months buried in the mud only to resurface once water levels are restored. AFD utilizes Flint Lake water for tender trucks should a fire emergency occur.
- 3) Poisoning – Chemical abatement by treating the water and all dead species are removed. Once the chemicals neutralize, the restocking of trout will commence. Drawbacks: Environmental downstream affects. Removal of dead species is very cumbersome and carcass disposal solutions are also unpleasant and complicated.
- 4) Manual removal of suckers – During spawning season in spring the suckers migrate and churn towards the high end of the lake. Volunteer teams will use small boats and cast nets or dip nets to remove the suckers. Ongoing removal would occur with normal fishing and no return of sucker policy. Drawbacks: Manpower, volunteers, and equipment requirements. Removal of the species is cumbersome and carcass disposal solutions are also unpleasant and complicated.

Solution Selection:

After discussing with property owners the preferred solution is manual removal with ongoing mitigation.

Research:

Research was conducted to determine carcass disposal method and options. The number of suckers recovered during the spawn will yield a large amount, perhaps approaching 1000 pounds. Burial was considered. The DOW was also contacted as to the proper way to dispose of the suckers during on-going mitigation. Throwing the suckers on the bank is not acceptable to the property owners and also promotes bear and other wildlife invasion.

Conducted additional research to locate fertilizer companies who may be interested in utilizing the fish for their manufacturing processes. (Repurpose considerations.)

During conversations with DOW they provided a source name that takes suckers and uses them in frozen bait distribution in SW Colorado.

Final Solution:

Contacted the bait vendor and he also conducts removal both during the spawn and throughout the summer (while supplies last). The proprietor has already met with the property owner and board member to discuss spawn timing and has committed to vast removal during the churn as well as on-going removal throughout the summer. There is no charge for this service, trout caught in cast or dip nets are safely returned and the vendor removes all fish to repurpose as frozen bait.

The solution will not completely eliminate all suckers from the lower lake, however, the controlled approach will improve the trout environment allowing the trout to become less affected by the sucker invasion and become the prevalent and heartier species.

The abatement solution will be performed annually to further control and reduce sucker populations.

Next Steps:

Develop signage to provide Flint Lake fishermen directions for proper invasive species handling and disposal. Other contests and incentives are being explored to further assist in abatement throughout the summer.