

As interest in management of common carp populations grows, so does Carp Solutions

 By Tony Kennedy Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

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The fishing season for Jordan Wein and Aaron Claus won't start for another month or so, but already they're predicting a much bigger haul than the 12,000 bronze-colored beauties they scored last year.

Carp Solutions, an upstart private company founded three years ago by a professor at the University of Minnesota, removes unwanted common carp in lakes infested with them. As more watershed managers see the results of improved water quality and more room for game fish, the phone keeps ringing with new business.

Natural resource managers from Michigan, Wisconsin and Colorado have all been on the line. Early local customers have included the Rice Creek Watershed District and Three Rivers Park District. Various lake associations also have shown interest in the company's services.

"We'll be adding four or five more technicians once classes end at the U," said Wein, the firm's general manager. "It's a busy time of year."

Last week, staff from Carp Solutions and Ramsey-Washington Metro Watershed District installed four barriers on the Owasso chain of lakes. One of those barriers was placed in a narrow channel between Wabasso Lake and prime carp spawning grounds around Grass Lake in Shoreview.

The objective is to force the rough fish to spawn in the undesirable habitat of the big lake where lots of their offspring will be gobbled up by bluegills, other panfish, bass, muskies and other species.

"That's a key part of the management strategy," said Bill Bartodziej, natural resources specialist for Ramsey-Washington.

He said the watershed district is paying Carp Solutions \$30,000 a year to reduce the heavy overabundance of common carp swimming in the Owasso Chain in northern Ramsey County. Step one under the contract was estimating the population—found to be 15,500 adult carp averaging 5 pounds a piece. The total estimated biomass of 195 pounds of common carp per acre was more than two times the level where water quality can be degraded.

The voracious, bottom-feeding fish destroy aquatic plants, stir up sediment and correlate with out-of-control phosphorus loads. They destroy habitat for waterfowl, game fish and amphibians.

Bartodziej said Ramsey-Washington officials saw carp control succeed in St. Paul's Phalen chain of lakes when the same strategies used by Carp Solutions were tested by fisheries biologists at the U. The adult carp population in Kohlman Lake, north of Phalen, has been cut in half, he said. Phalen, itself, is "doing great" on carp control, Bartodziej said, and property owners around Gervais Lake say the difference is palpable.

"They haven't seen water quality this good in decades," he said.

Carp Solutions is owned by Przemek "Shemeck" Bajer, a research scientist who has been at the forefront of common carp studies at the U since 2006. The long-living fish were introduced to Minnesota long ago in a federal government lake-stocking program. They've become invasive in many waters where they dominate shallow spawning areas that are inhospitable to predators.

Wein, who earned a master's degree in ecology from the U in 2010, served in the Peace Corps in Ghana, West Africa. He returned to Minnesota in September 2013 and worked for St. Paul Parks and Recreation. Since joining Carp Solutions at its inception in 2015, he's managed all projects. He and Claus, who graduated from the U in 2016 with a master's degree in fisheries biology, lead the company.

Wein said one of his favorite tools is a baited box net used for the mass removal of carp. Corn is placed on the bottom of the net for a couple of weeks to attract the fish. When a large number of carp is feeding on the bait, the sides are pulled up to trap them.

In a single application last year on Owasso, the hand-operated trap pulled in 1,300 carp, eliminating about 8 percent of adult carp. Wein and Claus will try to repeat that performance this year.

Meanwhile, a commercial fisherman has been retained by Ramsey-Washington to potentially net carp with a crane-operated purse seine while the fish congregate during spawning season or at other times. Biologists from Carp Solutions track movements of the fish by following signals from a select number of radio-tagged carp.

Chris O'Brien, a spokesman for the watershed district, said the telemetry studies have shown the northwest bay of Owasso to be a popular schooling location for the fish. But the tracking also has demonstrated that the carp move around quite a bit and don't stay congregated for very long.

Wein said one of his company's growing pains is finding useful ways to dump harvested carp. Carp Solutions operates under research permits issued by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The permits prohibit sale of the fish. The remains must be donated or disposed.

Depending on a wide-range of variables, this year's catch of common carp by the company could soar from 12,000 fish to potentially more than 20,000 or as high as 30,000, Wein said.

“More and more we are looking to dispose of them in useful ways,” he said.

So far, Wein said, Wildlife Science Center in Stacy, Minnesota, has become one of the company’s chief outlets for the carp. The nonprofit research and education center cares for captive wolves, coyotes, bears, foxes, raptors and other wildlife species. The fish are kept in the center’s large freezers as food for the animals.