

Fish Kill on Lake Poinsett - April 1978

South Dakota

Tuesday, April 18, 1978

28 Pages



Dead fish cleanup planned

Winterkill evident at Lake Poinsett

By JERRY LESLIE
Register State Editor

ESTELLINE—Waders and pitchforks will be in style this weekend for cabin and homeowners at Lake Poinsett as they spend a busy weekend cleaning up dead fish from a severe winterkill.

Thousands of dead fish, mostly buffalo, ringed the north and west shores Monday after a weekend of southeasterly winds. Now northwesterly winds are blowing some of the fish in the opposite direction.

Residents of the largest natural lake in South Dakota still are trying to assess the severity of the winterkill. They know it's serious from the unusual numbers of dead fish on the shore. "If there are not a lot of dead fish on the bottom we don't expect the kill to be as severe as once thought, certainly not like the kill of 1946," said Glenn Robinson, executive director of the Lake Poinsett Area Development Association.

The jury will be out on the winterkill until commercial fisherman Dave Rau brings in 16 traps he set in the lake since the ice melted.

The Hamlin County Sportsmen's Clubhouse will be the headquarters for the cleanup operation this weekend.

Robinson said the Game, Fish and Parks Department will dig two pits, one a half-mile west of Stone Bridge near S.D. 28, and another south of Lake Poinsett in the State Recreation Area. The north pit will be 10 feet wide and 150 feet long. Fish will be piled up about five feet deep and covered with three to four feet of dirt, as required by the Environmental Protection Agency, Robinson said.

At a meeting of the Hamlin County Commissioners today, the LPADA hoped to secure commitments for trucks and front end loaders. They also expect help from Brookings County Commissioners for the portion of the lake in Brookings County. Some help also is expected from the National Guard at Clear Lake, although the governor said he couldn't call out the guard unless there was a health hazard.

The LPADA is looking for individual

(SEE: CLEANUP, continued on Page 2)

Thousands of dead fish line the shores at Lake Poinsett awaiting volunteer cleanup crews scheduled to go to work next weekend. Plans are to dig two large burial pits, have individual lot owners clean up their own lots and take the fish to the pits. Volunteers using county equipment are

expected to handle the largest concentrations of fish. The winterkill was the result of heavy snow which kept the sun from shining through the ice and producing oxygen needed for fish life. (Register photo by Jerry Leslie)

Cleanup

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take the front end loaders and trucks and go all around the lake," Robinson said. On this trek the crew will need the help of property owners, he said.

Robinson said the fish floating are buffalo. Carp, he said, are known to be the first fish to die from low oxygen levels.

"We don't know where the carp are. They may be on the botton." Robinson said there is evidence of dead perch. "We have not seen any dead walleyes or northern pike," he said.

"We can't tell much until we see what comes up. Generally game fish go to the bottom where they die and don't come up too much," he said.

The Game, Fish and Parks Department has begun restocking the lake with perch, said Robinson. He said the department is putting in adult perch that are ready to spawn in the lake.

He reported the Game, Fish and Parks stocking goal for Lake Poinsett this year at 4 million walleye fry, 800,000 perch fingerlings, 8,000 adult perch and 500,000 northern pike fry.

Another positive factor is the fact the level of the lake, which dropped several feet below normal during the drought years and left docks high and dry, is now rising as the spring runoff from the Big Sioux River is diverted into the lake.

Robinson said the lake has risen to near the desired level.

This weekend's cleanup operation involves a coordinated effort by the Lake Poinsett Area Development Association, the State Game, Fish and Parks Department, the Hamlin and Brookings County Commissioners, the Hamlin County Sportsmen's Club and interested persons around the lake.

Robinson mentioned very little interest has been shown by farmers in using the fish for fertilizer, largely because fields are too wet to get into.

He did notice a man from Altamont picking up dead fish by the truck load and taking them home for use as fertilizer, but this was evidently an isolated case.

cabin owners to don waders and carry pitchforks and pick up the fish on their individual lots and haul them to the burial pits, according to Robinson.

Meanwhile, volunteers will gather with the loaders and trucks to attack the large concentrations of fish that would be too much for an individual cottage owner.

"We hope where there is only a small amount of fish on the property, the owners will get rid of these fish somehow themselves as they have done every summer," Robinson said.

As for the volunteer crew, "after we get the large concentrations, we will

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need to become involved if the dead fish problem is serious enough to become a health hazard.

Nelson also wondered whether the state could mobilize a National Guard unit for a time to dispose of fish. Whether fish will be buried in pits or otherwise disposed of has not been decided, according to Nelson.

Lake Poinsett is South Dakota's largest natural lake, not counting the border lakes of Big Stone and Traverse.

Dr. Charles Scalet, head of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences at South Dakota State University, estimates Lake Poinsett could produce about five million pounds of dead fish alone, or 2,500 tons.

Even smaller lakes, such as Goldsmith located north of Volga, could yield up to 100 tons of fish carcasses. Losses in Lake Sinai could result in more than 160 tons.

If the problem of clean-up and transportation can be solved Dr. Paul Carson of the Plant Science Department at SDSU says the fish could become a source of fertilizer for nearby farmers. Manure spreaders might be used for field distribution although clogging might be a problem on some machinery models.

Dr. Carson pointed out a ton of fish would contain between 60 and 75 pounds of nitrogen and from 20-30 pounds of phosphorus. At current fertilizer prices that would make the fish worth about \$20 per ton (\$15 a ton for nitrogen and about \$5 a ton for phosphorus content.) Fish would contain some other nutrients but in small amounts. The fish would be worth about the same to organic gardeners.

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The agronomist estimates only about 50-60 percent of the nutrients contained in fish would be available for plant growth the first year.

The problem of gathering the fish and spreading them over large acreages will be important. "Time is a factor, of course, because the fish are perishable," Scalet said.

Robert Hanten, fisheries specialist for the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, has been working on the cleanup and disposal problem. Although the state does not have plans for cleaning up most lake shores, areas of high concentrations of dead fish which pose either a public health or nuisance problem will have the top priority in terms of any clean-up and disposal effort the state might become involved in.

Dr. Scalet estimates only a portion of the dead fish would be cleaned up by the Game, Fish and Parks. GF&P will probably call for help from lake association's and sportsmen's groups to supplement their efforts.

Plans are now being made by the State Game, Fish and Parks Department to restock lakes which have experienced severe winterkill as quickly as possible. One benefit of the winterkill problem is rough fish will be replaced with desirable game fish.

The winterkill is the result of a long and heavy snowcover on lakes which keeps sunlight from penetrating the ice and stimulating oxygen-producing plant life. The result is oxygen levels too low for fish life, conservation agents have explained.

National Guard units assist with Cooperation was tremendous

National Guard Units from Brookings, Clear Lake and DeSmet joined Game, Fish & Parks personnel as well as hundreds of volunteers in clean-up operations of the dead fish lining the shores of lake Poinsett last week. Some Guard units were still working the shorelines Monday afternoon this week. The photos on this page were taken by Stan Lundquist and R. Wermers and developed and printed by the Estelline Journal. Another venture of cooperation between these three individuals.

Cooperation is the word used to describe action that has taken place on lake Poinsett the past couple weeks with regard to the removal and burial of the millions of pounds of dead fish.

This cooperation has come from the top state level, meaning Gov. Kneip and the Game, Fish & Parks, National Guard, Highway Patrol, Hamlin and Brookings counties, Phone Company, to hundreds of individuals as well as private equipment owners, cafes, etc., etc.

Pitchforks, pay loaders, wheelbarrows, elevators, all have been utilized in the pickup of the dead fish from shorelines. An estimated seven and a half million pounds have been removed and buried as of Monday this week.

National Guard units were utilized over the past week in the assistance as well as some fifty personnel from the G.F. & Parks in digging pits, hauling and burying the dead ones. Rainy weather hampered opera-

tions somewhat last week but the work continued through the operation headquarters set up in a Motel room number 3 at Pier 81.

The 8,000-acre lake, said to be the largest natural lake in South Dakota, suffered a winterkill of fish because of heavy snow cover.

A lot of the dead fish went to the bottom and it is believed the wave action is bringing them up now.

"It's a little more extensive kill than originally thought," said a spokesman for the LPADA.

Cleanup at lake Poinsett



BURY DEAD FISH- The above photo as well as the two below show National Guard dump trucks as they dump thousands of pounds of dead fish into burial pits.



DIG BURIAL PITS- A National Guard bulldozer is shown digging one of the huge burial pits.

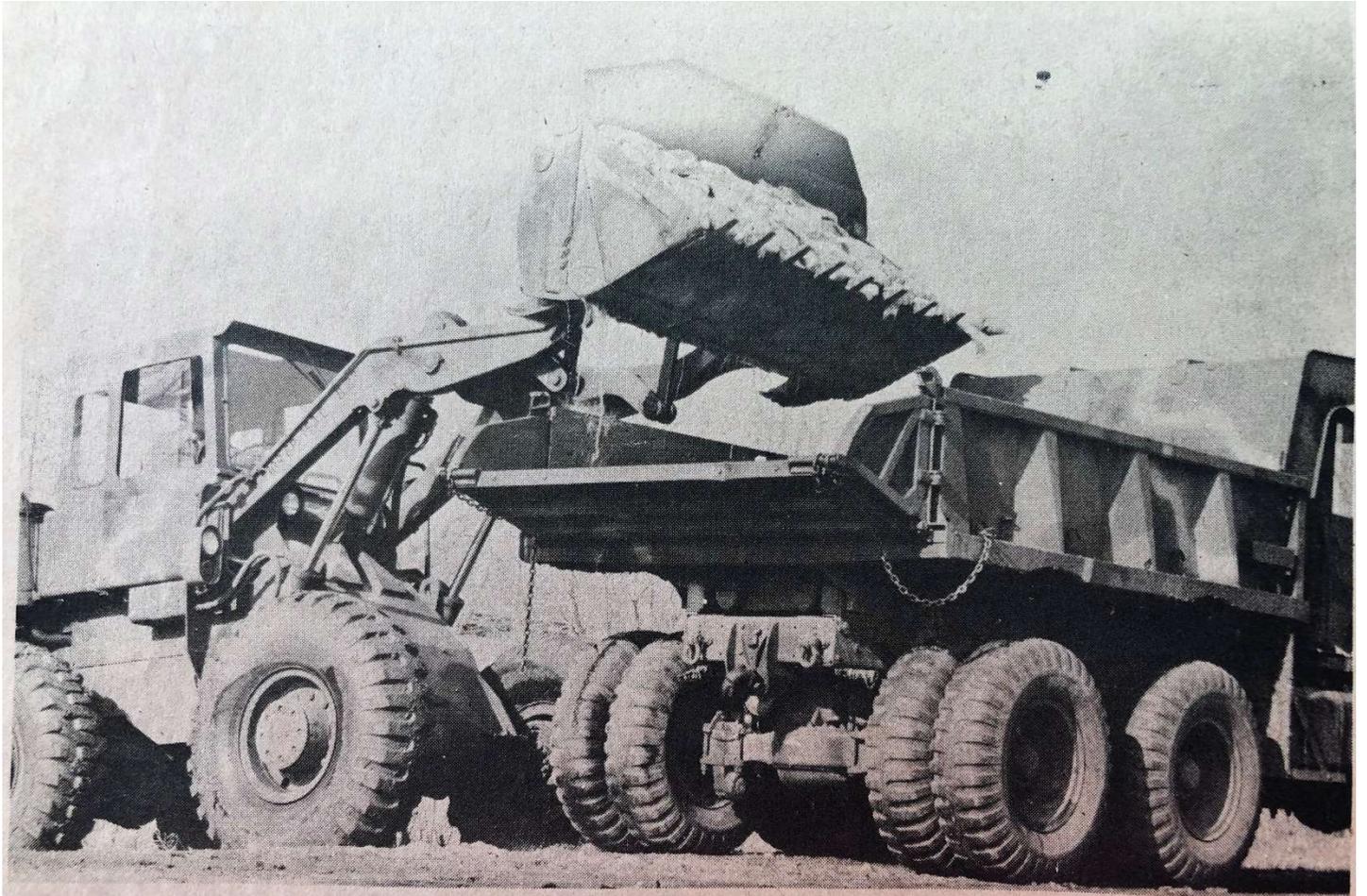


Guardsmen use elevator to load dead fish from lake shore into waiting trucks.



Members of the Game, Fish and Parks Department use pitchforks to clear up some of the dead fish remaining from the massive winterkill at Lake Poinsett. After "forking" the fish into front-end loaders, the loaders dump the fish into dump trucks to be taken to disposal pits and buried.

Photos and text
by Tim Gebhart



PAYLOADERS ALSO USED- National Guard payloaders were used along the shorelines to load the dead fish into trucks to be taken to burial sites.

**Join Your LPADA
at the Dance
\$7.50**

Admission: A Paid-up membership!!
Guests Welcome . . . admission at the door)

Music by Harlof Jensen Band

**SUNDAY MORNING,
JUNE 18**

Pancake Breakfast

(Father's Day, Of Course!)

Sportsmen's Clubhouse

8:00 a.m. to Noon

Adults \$1⁷⁵

Under 12 \$1⁰⁰

(Guests Welcome, Too)

THE 1978 LAKE POINSETT WINTERKILL OF FISH: As the ice on the lake thawed, the winterkill was far more extensive than anticipated. Floyd Tawzer said it very well as he described the situation as "one hell of a mess of fish to pick up." Prior to any clean-up operation, one could not imagine the seriousness of the winterkill unless it was personally seen. Once the fact that massive kill was confronting the Directors and that a health hazard would exist, calls went out to Gov. Kneip and Jack Merwin, Director of Game, Fish & Parks to enlist their help from state agencies. Daily meetings were held with Jack Opitz, Stan Lundquist of GF&P, board members and a few concerned property owners to assess the winterkill and to begin planning for the removal of dead fish. Personal contacts with Commissioners of Hamlin and Brookings Counties were made alerting them to the problem and asking for their help in supplying equipment and manpower. Telephone calls to area radio stations, TV stations and newspapers were made in order to alert property owners of the serious problem of the fish-kill and asking for their help in the pitching of fish.

REMOVAL OF DEAD FISH: While the clean-up operation is now past history, a brief description will be presented in order to give you an idea as to what happened. It is difficult to describe the clean-up operation. While the process, at times, seemed unorganized, WE GOT THE JOB DONE!!!!

The prevailing winds had massed the fish along the entire west side and the south end of the lake. At pre-clean-up meetings it was decided that the huge concentrations of dead

fish should be attacked first. The motto of the operation, while not grammatically correct, was "Get the Most-est, the Easy-est." The shoreline on the west side of the lake was the "easiest" because of accessibility for removal equipment.

During early days of fish removal it could be seen that a definite emergency situation was imminent unless fish were removed as soon as possible. Through excellent cooperation from Gov. Kneip, National Guard Officials, the Emergency Civil Defense Office and the Department of Game, Fish and Parks, it was decided to pull out all stops to get the fish removed. Headquarters for the National Guard was set up at Fish Haven. A helicopter was used to survey the lake and to determine just where the huge concentration were. Meetings were held each evening and early morning with Major Jim Murphy and his staff, Jack Opitz, Stan Lundquist of the Game, Fish & Parks, along with members of the LPADA, and friends of the lake to plan for each day's operation.

Cooperation was of the finest among all groups and individuals. There are too many to thank and the Board of Directors wishes to say a big Thank You to all involved.

BITS of INFORMATION ABOUT CLEAN-UP:

1. April 19th Hamlin County equipment of 1 payloader and operator, 2 trucks and drivers were on scene. Small group of "fish pitchers" and equipment began pick-up of dead fish at north end of west side and along the west shoreline.
2. Same equipment and same small group of dedicated property owners plus a few friends of Lake Poinsett were there for April 20-21-22-23.
3. Jack Merwin arrived during this period and inspected the fish kill. He agreed a definite emergency did exist.
4. During this same period of time an elevator and Brookings County payloader trucks were being employed on the South end of the lake. The elevator was the only way several pockets of fish could be removed from the lake.
5. Also John Vanderwal brought a payloader and operated it. Kerns Machinery of Sioux

5. Also John Vanderwal brought a payloader and operated it. Kerns Machinery of Sioux Falls brought a payloader to the area. Fred Haufschild of Arlington supplied a payloader and 2 trucks, also operators. Gale Nitteberg supplied 2 payloaders and operators.

6. Up to this time the whole process was being carried out by local groups.

7. Ages of the fish pitchers ranged from 80's, in the 70's, 60's and some "young-uns" during the first four days.

8. Once an emergency health hazard was established, volunteers of the National Guard were called and arrived with payloaders and trucks on April 24th. Funding for the National Guard personnel was provided by the Emergency Civil Defense Office.

9. At the same time, Game, Fish & Parks personnel from all over the state came to pitch fish.

10. April 29 at 6:00 P.M.-Big operation of fish removal ended.

11. The National Guard left 2 payloaders and 4 trucks, all with operators, to be used in further clean-up. A small group of volunteers from the National Guard were also present as pitchers. They stayed through May 3rd.

12. Organized removal of dead fish was still going on through May 10th, using any available equipment.

13. Jack Merwin estimated that 9½ million pounds of dead fish were removed and buried during the clean-up operation.

14. It was a physically tiring job. Most of we old-timers were in bed by 9:00 P.M.

BURYING OF FISH. Stan Lundquist, Hamlin County Game Warden, took over the task of finding areas to bury the fish. In accordance with Environmental Protection Agency regulations, areas of "firm ground" had to be located. Pits were dug on private farm land one mile west of Stone Bridge, on property owned by the Methodist Camp and on State Park land located south east of the lake. The LPADA is deeply appreciative to those involved in granting permission to use their property.

To bury 9 million pounds of dead fish was a great undertaking. Burying pits were over 100 feet deep and at least 15 feet wide. All fish were covered with at least 4 feet of dirt in keeping with EPA regulations. A total of 14 pits were dug and filled with dead fish, Thanks Stan!

LPADA BOARD OF DIRECTORS WORKS FOR YOU! It became quite evident from the beginning that there would be a financial drain on the Association. Yet the directors felt it an absolute

necessity to spend whatever it took to adequately complete the clean-up process. Some of the expenses which confront the Association are the following:

1. Paying hourly and daily wages of payloader operators and truck drivers of several companies which were helping in the project. (Amounts yet to be submitted).
2. Spend \$220.00 for pitchforks.
3. Supplied gas for many of the privately owned payloaders and trucks and tractors.
4. Paid for daily use of elevators (amount not known as of this writing).
5. May 13-LPADA Directors gave Floyd Tawzer permission to buy at Association expense 2000 crappie fingerlings to aid in the restocking program. This cost will be approximately \$300.00.
6. The LPADA Board of Directors went on record at the May 13th to sponsor for the 1978 summer session, a garbage pick-up service. This service will be for all cottage dwellers around the lake. There will be NO EXPENSE to cottage dwellers . . (See Garbage Service later on in Newsletter).
7. Other incidental expenses.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO HELP!!!!

If you were physically unable to help in the fish removal project

or

If your business or professional obligations were such to keep you from helping

or

If you were too far away to aid physically in the clean-up operation

and

You would like to help in a financial way the Association, a contribution would certainly be appreciated. A few donations ranging from \$25.00 to \$50.00 have already been received.

A small number of dedicated property owners and friends of the lake not only worked terribly hard physically pitching fish but paid for their own food each day, their transportation cost, cost of boots and it became a rather expensive project for them.

So please help the Association by sending a donation to Francis Malone, LPADA, Treasurer, Oldham, S.D. 57051.

IT SOUNDS SO GOOD!! It is always nice to receive a compliment and the following letter addressed to the Board of Directors makes our efforts seem worthwhile:

THANK YOU!

THANK YOU!

We wish to take this means of expressing our sincere appreciation to the Lake Poinsett Area Development Association officers and members, and all others who volunteered and did such a fine job of disposing of the vast number of dead fish on the beaches—a task which we realize was anything but pleasant. We also thank all those who furnished the necessary equipment to get the job done. Returning from Arizona on May 5th and finding only a few fish in evidence was, indeed, a pleasant surprise. It's cooperation of this caliber that makes living at Lake Poinsett such a joy. Many thanks to all of you good people.

Muriel and Hollis M. Hill

HAVE YOU PAID YOUR DUES? If not please send your check for \$7.50 payable to LPADA to Francis Malone, LPADA Treasurer, American State Bank, Oldham, South Dakota 57051.

RESTOCKING of GAME FISH in LAKE POINSETT: The restocking of game fish began in early May. As of May 18th the following specie, witnessed by your Executive Secretary, have been planted in the lake by the Game, Fish & Parks Department.

2100 adult perch. These fish will spawn this spring.

500,000 northern fry were planted in weedy areas around the lake and in the inlet on May 5.

4 million walleye fry were planted in the lake on May 16.

As previously stated the Board of Directors are buying 2,000 crappie (larger than fingerlings) from commercial companies to be placed in the lake in the near future.

Plans are finalizing to seine over-populated lakes for adult specie of game fish. Volunteer help from property owners will help the Game, Fish & Parks personnel in this operation.

Survival rate of the restocked fish should be greater because of the removal of such great numbers of rough fish. Only time will tell!

