

False River yields big haul



Advocate staff photos by ARTHUR D. LAUCK

Fish caught with gill nets are displayed during the first commercial fishing season in False River in 20 years. They were hauled in Thursday by Richard Durett and his son, Andrew. Buffalo fish and catfish made up most of the catch.

Commercial fishing resumes on lake after 20-year ban

BY TERRY L. JONES

Westlake bureau

NEW ROADS — Richard Durett usually does most of his commercial fishing in the Atchafalaya River, but from now until the end of February, the Simmesport fisherman is able to cast his nets into the waters of False River for the first time in more than 20 years.

Thursday marked the official resumption of commercial fishing in the troubled lake, which has been in decline the past 30 years due to excessive siltation and other factors.

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries recently lifted its 1991 ban on commercial gill-netting in the 22-mile-long oxbow lake as part of a multi-tiered restoration plan driving the local and state efforts to return the lake to its former glory as a hot spot for trophy bass fishing.

The regulation that prevented commercial fishing in False River had become outdated, said Mike Wood, director of Inland Fisheries for the state's Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.



Andrew Durett, left, and his father, Richard Durett, haul in a large buffalo fish Thursday on the first day of commercial gill-net fishing in False River in 20 years.

"It's important to harvest excessive numbers of these commercial fish," Wood said, "because they influence other fish in a negative way if they become too abundant."

Wood said the False River gill-netting ban was issued during a time when the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries did not want its efforts of regulating the lake's population of large bass fish undermined by commercial fishing.

pected to get about 20 cents a pound after his catch was processed and sold at his market, Simmesport Fish Co.

"There's plenty of fish out there," Durett said. "I'll probably be fishing here from now until the end of the season." The special fishing season will last until Feb. 28.

Wood said Durett's haul on Thursday demonstrated the overabundance of bottom-feeding fish currently populating False River.

The bottom-feeders constantly stir up sediment on the lake bottom, resulting in muddy water, smothered vegetation and interference in spawning of the trophy bass population, Wood added.

Wood said the commercial season will become a "continuous thing" because it's part of the department's larger goal to address the habitat issues plaguing the lake at this time.

"This has worked in several other lakes," Wood said, referring to the new commercial season. "There are far fewer

Around 9 a.m. Thursday, Durett and his son, Andrew Durett, 30, docked their boat at the landing near Morel's Restaurant laden with about 2,000 pounds of buffalo fish, catfish, gaspergou and German carp the pair caught in the nets they had lowered into False River on Wednesday night.

Durett, 43, said he'd probably end up catching about 6,000 pounds of fish by the end of the day. Durett added that he ex-

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recreational anglers and water sport people out there right now, so this shouldn't create conflict with those user groups and we still get this utilization of the lake in the winter months."

Ron Pourciau, president of the Twin River Anglers, a local chapter of the B.A.S.S. Federation, believes the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries decision to re-open False River to commercial fishing is a major step in the right direction.

"We have to support the science," he said Thursday. "If we support the science, we can't go wrong."

The special fishing season is one of the cost-free improvement initiatives recommended in the False River Ecosystem Restoration Plan made public in June.

Other goals listed in the plan include channeling and sediment basin maintenance, the once-controversial lake draw-down and dredging of lake sediments to create island terraces — one of the most expensive endeavors included in the plan.

Wood said the Pointe Coupee Parish Police Jury already has helped in the restoration ef-

forts by moving waterskiing buoys into the lake's deeper waters, a decision leading to improved safety and creating less water turbulence that can disturb the lake bottom.

Moving the buoys was a recommendation of the False River Watershed Council, an appointed body of state and local officials now monitoring the revitalization efforts, said state Rep. Major Thibaut, D-New Roads.

He said Thursday he's confident \$500,000 in capital outlay funding from the state Legislature will be allocated toward saving the lake. Thibaut said about \$2.2 million in additional state funding may be allotted next year.

"The \$500,000 will help us get started with the silt issue," Thibaut said. "We have finally come to a point where we have had many different entities and agencies studying this thing for 10 years. Now people in the community want to see things happen."

Wood said the next order of business will be determining how much sediment is getting into False River from its tributaries.

According to the restoration plan, that can be done for \$50,000 through a watershed drainage network assessment.