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These carp have connections

Tom Meersman, Star Tribune

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Sometimes carp have friends in high places.

That's what federal fisheries expert Jerry Rasmussen eventually would learn after his telephone rang one day in July 2000, and he heard the voice of his supervisor from Minneapolis.

Rasmussen, an official with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Rock Island, Ill., had worked with several states on a proposal to restrict sales of black carp from Asia -- a threat to native snails and mussels if the fish ever got loose in the wild.

After the call, Rasmussen's career entered bureaucratic limbo.

The same thing happened to the plans to regulate the carp. Four years later the restrictions still aren't in place even though wildlife agencies and political leaders in more than 24 states have pressed for them.



Jerry Rasmussen worked with officials in 28 states concerned with the escalating growth of carp in rivers and streams.

Marlin Levison

Star Tribune

This story of a middle-level federal official and the black carp is an illustration of how politics can influence a seemingly obscure issue in fisheries management.

Career on the line

On the day of the phone call, Rasmussen says, his supervisor ordered him immediately to stop working on the request to regulate carp. Three weeks later, that supervisor's boss called Rasmussen and summoned him to Minnesota for a meeting, he said.

Rasmussen, an award-winning expert on large river fisheries with three decades of experience, had plenty to think about during the short plane ride. He said he suspected that his career was on the line. He knew that the proposed restrictions on black carp struck a nerve with fish farmers, who relied on the fish to eat snails and control



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disease in catfish-rearing ponds.



A barrier separates fish ponds on the Keo Fish Farm near Keo, Ark.

Marlin Levison

Star Tribune

And he knew that two pro-aquaculture officials from Arkansas recently had traveled to Washington, D.C., and met with Jamie Rappaport Clark, then-director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. The officials complained to her about Rasmussen and the proposal to restrict interstate sales and transport of black carp.

On his arrival in Minneapolis, Rasmussen quickly learned that his job had been eliminated and that he had been reassigned. It's still unclear exactly who in the agency's bureaucracy put Rasmussen out of his job and derailed the carp restrictions. But the two Arkansas officials who met with Clark take credit for the changes.

The officials were Arkansas Fish and Game Commissioner Mike Freeze, who raises black carp, and Ted McNulty, aquaculture coordinator for the state's development agency. They said they told Clark that restrictions on carp would devastate aquaculture, a \$1 billion-a-year industry in Arkansas.

Freeze said the federal agency "was on a fast track to list black carp until we went up there and talked to her."

Denial and backlash

Clark, who now works for Defenders of Wildlife, a national conservation organization, said she remembered the meeting but not whether the agency slowed its review of the black carp. She denied having anything to do with Rasmussen's reassignment.

As a result of the job change, Rasmussen no longer could work with fishery managers from 28 states and several tribes, a group called the Mississippi Interstate Cooperative Resource Association. Since 1991, he had coordinated its meetings, correspondence and other activities under an agreement approved by his supervisors at the federal Fish and Wildlife Service.

The association in early 2000 had petitioned the federal agency to declare the black carp an "injurious species," which would ban its sale across state lines and prohibit further importation without a special permit.

The state fishery officials feared the black carp would escape into rivers, as had other Asian carp species. Although the black carp are sterilized at fish farms, the voracious feeders live 15 years or more.

Rasmussen's bosses said in a letter to the state officials that he had been taken off the job because of budget concerns and the "perception of a conflict of interest" because he was helping states to petition his agency. State fishery managers didn't buy that explanation and were further irked when federal officials told them not to talk to Rasmussen.

"We were told that we couldn't contact Jerry, and Jerry couldn't contact us, and that if we did that, he would be fired," said Bill Reeves, fisheries chief of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency.

"We were just dumbfounded, first of all that it would even happen, and second that they were dictating such a moronic order to state agencies that aren't even under their control."

Roger Rostvet, deputy director for North Dakota's Game and Fish Department, wrote to federal officials that Rasmussen's reassignment was more a "conflict of politics" than a "conflict of interest." Officials from other states wrote similarly critical letters.

In the face of such criticism, federal wildlife managers eventually allowed Rasmussen to resume his work with the fisheries group in 2002. The proposal for carp regulation remains under review. Meanwhile, fisheries experts identified a fish caught in a Louisiana river in April as a black carp.

Rasmussen, in his first interview about what happened, said he is not surprised at his treatment or the agency's lack of action on black carp.

"There's no doubt there's politics in all of this," he said. "It's not just innocent species out here swimming around and how did they get there. It's not all by accident."

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