

PUBLIC PREFERENCES FOR MANAGEMENT OF AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES IN FLORIDA WATERS

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There is a growing public debate among Florida residents over the use of aquatic herbicides to manage hydrilla, one of the most widely spread and aggressive invasive aquatic plants found in Florida. If left unmanaged, hydrilla can displace native plants, impede recreational activities, and block water flow in canals vital for flood-control during severe weather events. Between 2005 and 2015, \$66 million was spent on hydrilla management in Florida. The primary method of control hydrilla is through aquatic herbicides applications. Although non-chemical methods of hydrilla management, such as mechanical harvesting exist, they tend to either be very expensive or less effective relative to chemical control.

Increasing stakeholder concerns about the potential environmental impacts of herbicide use in Florida waters has led to a temporary statewide moratorium on aquatic herbicide use. A series of public meetings revealed a strong preference for mechanical harvesting over herbicide use by the stakeholders in attendance. However, it remains unclear if the opinions expressed in these public meetings align with the general preferences of the rest of Florida residents. Given that aquatic plant management is largely driven by stakeholder needs, it is important to understand the extent of these concerns throughout the state.

Using a choice experiment study design, we surveyed 2,000 Florida residents to evaluate their awareness and preferences regarding hydrilla management methods. We assessed how preferences for hydrilla management methods vary with demographic and socio-economic characteristics, and other attributes, such as knowledge of hydrilla, recreational use of water bodies, spatial proximity to a water body, among others. Given the importance of public engagement on issues pertaining to lake management, we also tested how information about hydrilla management options provided by different sources impacts preferences. Results of the survey provide important and policy relevant insights for management of Florida public waters.

PRESENTER BIO: Dr. Savchenko is an Assistant Professor in Food and Resource Economics Department. Her research uses experimental economics and non-market valuation techniques to quantify the impact of human behavioral changes on natural systems. She is particularly interested in studying policy-relevant issues related to the management of water resources. Dr. Savchenko's research has been published in the top journals in the field of agricultural and applied economics.