

Texas Wild-rice Finds Refuge at Hatchery

by Craig Springer



Federal and State biologists scramble to rescue Texas wild-rice after a dam breach threatened the aquatic endangered plant.

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While some folks fretted over a Y2K meltdown last New Year's Eve, biologists at the San Marcos National Fish Hatchery and Technology Center contended with a real crisis: the accidental drawdown of the San Marcos River in central Texas.

The new year ushered in heavy rains, causing a low-head dam to breach near the town of San Marcos. With the dam compromised, the river dropped and its width narrowed, leaving 25 percent of the entire population of the endangered Texas wild-rice (*Zizania texana*) either high and dry or in water flowing too fast. This species is found only in the San Marcos River.

"With so few plants out there in the wild, we had to act decisively or risk losing up to 400 plants," said Paula Power, Fish and Wildlife Service botanist at the San Marcos hatchery. "We potted and transferred 184 wild-rice plants to the hatchery. Another 60 plants were moved to safer sites within the river." In 1978, the Service listed the Texas wild-rice as endangered, and since 1996, hatcheries have played a critical role in the plant's conservation. About 40 plants are normally kept at the San Marcos facility, and an additional 40 plants are maintained at Uvalde National Fish Hatchery in Uvalde, Texas. The second refugia population at Uvalde lends an added layer of security. Workers at both hatcheries keep the plants healthy and replot the tillers, the product of asexual reproduction, which grow into mature plants. These new plants are ultimately transplanted to face the rigors of life in the river.

"Our experience with Texas wild-rice in the hatcheries proved invaluable when the dam broke," said Power. "Moreover, without a place to move the plants to, recovery of wild-rice would have been set back significantly. The hatcheries mean a lot for the future of Texas wild-rice."

Service hatchery personnel didn't toil alone. The Texas Parks and Wildlife



Department and the Service's Ecological Services Field Office in Austin chipped in, slinging shovels for the salvage. The wild-rice transplants are being cared for and monitored regularly until they can be returned to the San Marcos River.

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