



Snail invasion of creek widens

By Cory Golden/Enterprise staff writer

New Zealand mud snails on Putah Creek have spread over about a 6-mile area and are likely colonizing Lake Solano, the creek's streamkeeper said Wednesday.

The invasive, non-native mollusks, which range in size from a grain of sand to 5 millimeters, have devastated trout streams in Montana.

Likely carried to California as stowaways on fishing tackle, the snails were first discovered Oct. 30 by Sacramento biologist Ken Davis in Putah Creek about 2 miles downstream from Lake Berryessa.

Davis and Rich Marovich, streamkeeper for the Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee, surveyed the creek by canoe Monday, spotting small numbers of snails past Lake Solano, about halfway between the Putah Diversion Dam and Winters - and about 6 miles downstream from where they were first found, Marovich said.

Where they were first spotted, the snails now coat rocks three-deep in some places.

"Those kinds of populations are really scary," Marovich said.

Putah Creek reopened to fishing last Saturday. The creek was closed for 120 days while officials mulled plans to eradicate the snail.

Much of the land along the creek where snails have been discovered is privately owned. Where fishermen do have access to the creek and Lake Solano, Marovich said they should follow guidelines to prevent the snail being taken unknowingly to another body of water.

"Prevention is still the best you can do," he said.

That the numbers downstream are small for now provides little consolation. Because they reproduce asexually, one snail can start a population of millions in months.

The New Zealand snails out-compete native mollusks and eat large amounts of algae, in turn reducing the population of mayflies and other aquatic insects vital to native fish.

Officials have opted against attempting to eradicate the snails chemically because it could not be done safely or efficiently.

Marovich said conservationists and fishermen can only wait and see, hoping the creek itself offers up some resilience. At least one species of crayfish that lives in the creek is known to eat the snail.

"Whether we can get a high enough population of crayfish to make any difference, we don't know," he said.

Marovich said it may turn out the snails and crayfish are akin to ground squirrels and hawks: "The hawks are more limited by (the number of squirrels) than the squirrels are limited by the hawks."

The Solano Water Agency has committed \$40,000 to a monitoring project through June. Davis plans to place rocks in wire baskets at regular intervals within the creek to gauge the snail population.

He also plans to begin photographing the creek's diverse invertebrates. Using the photos taken by fishermen and members of the public, he'll then be able to help catalog the creek's insects.

"Without that kind of information, we won't even know what we've lost," Marovich said.

A timeline for the invertebrate project has not yet been set. Those interested in taking part may contact Dawn Lindstrom of the Putah Creek Council at 757-2776 or at coordinator@putahcreekcouncil.org.

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