

## Quagga mussel fight enters new phase

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson  
 Wednesday, 19 March 2008  
 Last Updated Wednesday, 19 March 2008

LAKE COUNTY &ndash; The Board of Supervisors intends to move forward with more than a dozen procedures meant to protect Clear Lake and other county water bodies from invasive quagga and zebra mussels which, if they arrived, could devastate the environment and the economy.

Prevention measures include purchasing decontamination stations, having Fish and Game train local businesses on inspection and decontamination, sending out mailers targeted to businesses and seeking use of Caltrans' digital signage.

The discussion leading to that decision stretched over four hours and 15 minutes. It drew passionate comment from county residents voicing everything from frustration that no serious prevention measures have been taken sooner to fears that the ultimate measure &ndash; a temporary lake closure &ndash; would effectively shut down tourism and other businesses that depend on it.

Supervisor Denise Rushing asked to have the issue brought back to the board. She said Clear Lake is a unique body of water, and is estimated to be between one and two million years old. She quoted a biologist as stating that the lake's biology will fundamentally change if the invasive mussels decide to make their home here.

In many ways the Tuesday board meeting was a tale of two treasures &ndash; Mt. Konocti and Clear Lake.

The board earlier in the day had enthusiastically supported a potential purchase of about 1,500 acres on Mt. Konocti, but the agonized discussion about how to protect the lake yielded no easy answers and a sense, at one point, that county staff and leaders were sharply divided on what path to take.

It was 10 months ago &ndash; on May 21, 2007 &ndash; that the board first took up the issue of quagga mussels, an invasive Ukrainian pest that, along with its cousin the zebra, was first detected in Southern California waterways early last year.

At that time, the board gave direction to Water Resources Deputy Director Pam Francis to order tests of the lake which, so far have yielded no positive results. They also gave Francis the OK to move forward with a public outreach campaign funded by \$10,000 from the aquatic plant management fund.

In June of 2007 the board also briefly explored the idea of closing the lake down altogether in order to thwart the mussels' arrival.

However, other than passing a resolution declaring the need for emergency action to protect the lake, no other official measures have been approved by the board.

The situation now

Francis' report to the board Tuesday noted the county has done extensive outreach on the invasive mussels, including developing a hotline, posting signs, advertising at the local movie theater, and distributing training videos to tribes and businesses.

Public Works Director Gerald Shaul, who oversees Water Resources and is set to leave his post for official retirement at the start of April, said that, based on the extensive research his staff has done he doesn't believe &ldquo;the sky is falling.&rdquo;

Of the invasive mussels Shaul said, &ldquo;They're going to get here. That's inevitable.&rdquo;

With public outreach and other measures Shaul suggested the mussels' arrival could be delayed.

During an hour-long PowerPoint presentation, Francis explained what the county could expect from an infestation, from increased maintenance costs to repair water treatment facilities to a blow to recreation. Ecological impacts, she added, are difficult to predict because each body of water is different.

A survey of boaters leaving the infested Lake Mead listed Clear Lake as the seventh most popular destination, Francis reported. It's believed that Lake Mead has had the mussels for five years, although they only were confirmed last year.

&ldquo;What that means for Clear Lake is we have been exposed,&rdquo; she said.

Francis pointed to the community's passion for the lake, and suggested that further outreach to the community and hospitality industry could reduce the risk of contaminated boats making their way into the lake.

In Francis' opinion, bass tournaments are not considered a major exposure risk. She said bass fishermen are aware of the problem and clean their boats.

Every dollar of prevention saves 80 times that much later, she said.

Board members discussed various measures, from local boat fees to lobbying Sacramento and other counties for more help, identifying local boats through stickers and, if a contaminated boat is found attempting to enter the county's waters, confiscation of the boat.

Rushing pointed to a mixed message in Francis' presentation. &ldquo;I think this is preventable. I don't buy that it's inevitable.&rdquo;

For Rushing, closing the lake to outside boats wasn't beyond consideration, because she said the board had a responsibility to prevent the mussels getting here.

Because the quagga has been in the state so long, Francis said she believed it is already in Lake County and Clear Lake, but just hasn't been discovered.

During her presentation, Francis outlined numerous potential local actions, including continued public outreach, use of increased signage and decontamination stations, and local boat use fees.

Community offers perspectives

Finley resident Phil Murphy suggested that one option was shutting the lake down until decontamination stations

— which Francis said could be quickly shipped from a Utah manufacturer — were delivered and put in operation.

Something has to be done, said Murphy, and while he wasn't impressed with the state's efforts, neither was he impressed with those at the local level. He pointed to a lack of quagga mussel signage at the boat ramp at the county park in Kelseyville, which Francis said could be quickly addressed.

Murphy also pointed to the fundamental change in the lake's biology that the mussels will cause. "This will absolutely have more impact on this lake than anything man has done in the 10,000 years we've been here."

It was incumbent on the board to act quickly, Murphy said. "If you're going to do it right, do it right now." Board Chair Ed Robey asked County Counsel Anita Grant if the county has the authority to close Clear Lake. Grant's interpretation of state law was that such a decision rests with the Department of Fish and Game.

Cobb Water District Manager Robert Stark suggested the county go ahead and close the lake anyway in order to make a point and protect the lake. "You need to act. Any action is better than no action."

And one big action, he suggested, "is to shut the lake for 30 days and let all heck break loose."

Lucerne resident Jack Bettencourt agreed with Murphy's assessment of the risks, and disagreed with Shaul's belief that the impacts are minimal.

He pointed to the fact that Clear Lake empties into the Bay-Delta, a major source of state water, and that water quality problems here will move downstream.

Bettencourt dismissed an honor system approach to protecting against the mussels. "The good intentions of people as a form of control is not terribly effective."

Clear Lake Advisory Subcommittee Member Ed Calkins voiced frustration that the board was getting bogged down in the details of how certain measures might work. "You have to decide if you really want to do something or not."

He said the lengthy Tuesday afternoon session mirrored the board's discussion 10 months earlier, in May of 2007, yet no action has been taken.

Pointing to the Mt. Konocti discussion in the morning, Calkins said, "You had a passion earlier in the day for buying Konocti ... but the passion doesn't exist for this topic."

Calkins quoted one scientist who suggested shutting the lake down to protect it. When Farrington asked what they should do, Calkins said the county should at least get the word out that efforts were under way to protect the lake. He suggested taking out ads in prominent boat and water recreation magazines.

John Brookes, a Kelseyville resident and retired biology professor, questioned the presumption that the bass fishing community is especially sensitive to the needs of the lake. He also said there is zero evidence for claims that dogs can be trained to sniff out quagga mussels, a project the Department of Fish and Game is now undertaking.

Lakeport Chamber Executive Director Melissa Fulton said, for her, education is the No. 1 way to protect the lake, and said she disagreed absolutely with closing the lake for any period of time.

Fulton said she has communicated with bass tournament organizers and she maintained they would uphold locally implemented rules to protect against the mussels. "They are not going to do anything that is going to jeopardize their business."

Lt. Lynette Shimek of Fish and Game, with her quagga-sniffing dog Kyrie, told the board more studies will take place this spring to prove the dogs' effectiveness. "I have total faith in her and I have total faith in the program."

If nothing else, the dogs' educational value is "worth their weight in gold," said Shimek, because everywhere they go people ask about the dogs and Fish and Game shares information about the quaggas.

Rushing asked Shimek under what circumstances Fish and Game would close the lake. Shimek said that decision is up to Fish and Game officials, but she said she didn't believe they would agree to it for the sake of prevention.

Board decides on next actions

"I'm going to put a stake in the ground," Rushing told fellow board members following the close of public comment.

She said she was willing to suggest the drastic measure of a brief lake closure, such as has happened in other parts of the state recently, while new inspection measures were set up.

Fulton asked the board to appoint a subcommittee consisting of two board members, Water Resources staff and others, including chamber members, who could come back with specific measures at the March 25 meeting. The ramifications of closing the lake are "far greater than anyone sitting in this room understands," she said.

Supervisor Rob Brown wanted to get rolling on putting in place local measures, which Francis seemed to want to talk the board out of doing.

She repeatedly suggested the board try to get state help or look at the issue regionally, but board members — who said they had lost faith in the state's ability to take meaningful action — wanted to press forward.

Addressing Francis directly about her reluctance, Brown said, "We've been given a presentation about how critical this is to the lake and now we're being talked out of it."

Responded Francis, "We have no staff, we have no resources. I'm not really sure who the board is looking to to implement this program."

The board agreed, however, to devote additional staff and resources in order to move forward.

"We absolutely, positively have to do something," said Supervisor Jeff Smith.

The board voted unanimously to move forward with Francis' list of 13 local measures and appointed Smith and Brown to sit on the subcommittee, which is scheduled to report back in a week.

E-mail Elizabeth Larson at [el Larson@lakeconews.com](mailto:el Larson@lakeconews.com).

{mos\_sb\_discuss:3}

