

New actions against invasive mussels planned locally, around the state

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKE COUNTY — Actions taken this week by the Board of Supervisors in establishing further measures against invasive mussels may impact other parts of the state. {sidebar id=72}

On Tuesday the Board of Supervisors unanimously approved an ordinance for fee-based inspections for quagga and zebra mussels that will become effective July 1. The mussels were discovered in Southern California waterways last year.

Pam Francis, deputy director of Lake County's Water Resources Division, said five other counties — among them Santa Clara, Kings and Shasta — are waiting to see the final ordinance, written by County Counsel Anita Grant — because they intend to copy it.

So far, the unwelcome visitors haven't been spotted in Lake County, Francis told the board Tuesday. "At this time, Lake County does not appear to be contaminated with mussels."

The county did have a scare, however, when a suspicious cluster of shellfish was found near Braito's Marina, said Francis.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture referred the shellfish to the Department of Fish and Game, which on Monday tested the mussels and found they were neither quaggas or zebras, Francis said.

"That was a huge relief to us all," she added.

On March 25, the board set into motion its first phase of action against the mussel invasion, accepting an interim urgency ordinance for a free inspection program that rolled out on April 8, as Lake County News has reported.

Since then, 15,000 inspection stickers have been distributed, said Francis, which was accomplished through the outreach efforts of business partners and volunteers, as well as a task force that designed the program. Another 15,000 are expected to be distributed throughout the rest of the calendar year.

The ordinance approved Tuesday calls for inspections that will cost \$10 for both visitors and residents, with proceeds supporting the county's inspection efforts, said Francis.

The county's invasive mussel task force determined that a tiered inspection fee structure was required, said Francis. The three layers of scrutiny begin with a screening application completed with the help of a qualified screener, who determines if the boat needs further inspection.

If it does, a certified inspector would be called in to go over the vessel. The cost of that inspection would depend on the resort or business conducting it, said Francis. The county has its own fee structure in the ordinance, which is based on size and length of vessel and if there is a bladder.

Should decontamination be required, vessels would be sent to one of four stations located around the lake's 105-mile perimeter, said Francis.

A half-hour of decontamination would cost between \$40 and \$70 — depending on location — and which would include an additional physical inspection once the boat was cleaned. Francis said state officials have estimated that only 1/100th of a percent of boats would need decontamination.

Inspection stickers given to local boats wouldn't have an expiration date, but the boats would require reinspection if they left the county, said Francis.

Stickers for the visitor inspection program would be a different color and have an expiration date at the end of the year, said Francis, with the additional requirement that if the boats leave the county they must be reinspected upon their return.

The county sent out 27 letters to various tribes, businesses and organizations, seeking interest for hosting the decontamination stations. Francis said they received five responses back — from Le Trianon Resort in Blue Lakes, Hillside Honda in Lakeport, Robinson Rancheria in Nice, and Braito's and Konocti Vista in Kelseyville.

Francis said the task force needed guidance on how to proceed with relation to locating the stations.

Supervisor Anthony Farrington wanted to see the stations place at "choke points" around the county, to prevent boats skirting the process. "My perspective is, we're either all the way in or we're not."

Like Farrington, Supervisor Denise Rushing was concerned that perimeter areas be monitored. "What's your level of confidence that we, by doing this, would have adequate enforcement activity going on?" she asked Supervisor Rob Brown, who sits on the task force.

Brown said he was confident in the measures being taken, nothing that "nothing is 100 percent."

He added that he felt keeping the program as inexpensive as possible would encourage people not to skip the inspections.

Board Chair Ed Robey said he wanted to contact Sonoma County Water Agency and see if they'll contribute to the county's inspection program. He pointed out that Lake Pillsbury is a major water supply for Sonoma County.

The board unanimously voted to advance the ordinance to next week's meeting for a second reading. The issue of where to place the decontamination stations will go back to the task force for additional discussion. Farrington also will join the task force, with Brown taking the alternate spot.

Alexia Retallack of the California Department of Fish and Game said different authorities around the state are looking at restrictions to control the spread of the mussels.

"Everyone is watching Clear Lake very carefully because it is such a significant and important lake," she said.

Fish and Game plans inspections

The same day as the board was discussing its new inspection ordinance, the Department of Fish and Game announced plans to conduct inspections on vehicles trailering watercraft north on Interstate 5 near Redding.

The mandatory inspections for quagga and zebra mussels will take place in the afternoon and evening of May 22 and May 23 at the California Highway Patrol Cottonwood Inspection Facility in Tehama County, the agency reported.

Retallack said Northern California is a major destination for visitors from all over California, especially on Memorial Day weekend.

"That point is a funnel point where we can do a lot of check son boats for the Northern California region," she said.

The inspections also are meant to drive home the point that the mussels are a threat, she said.

The Fish and Game inspections will look similar to protocols adopted in Lake County. Game wardens will ask vessel owners questions about their watercraft, with clean vessels allowed to proceed back onto the interstate.

However, if boats are found to be suspect, they'll be inspected onsite by trained biologists using specially trained detection dogs, the agency reported. Vessels found to have not be cleaned, drained and dried also will be inspected and could be quarantined.

Fish and Game also will have detection dogs trained to sniff out the mussels at the checkpoint, said Retallack. The dogs, she added, have been effective in the inspection process.

On Friday, Lake Tahoe is launching its own inspection program, Retallack said.

Officials are pushing for people to clean, drain and dry their boats and check with their destinations to be sure of local restrictions, said Retallack. The more people know, the less likely it is the mussels will be spread.

Retallack said numerous agencies are working to protect the more than 4,100 lakes and reservoirs and 30,000 miles of rivers and streams throughout California.

"We're doing pretty good in terms of the scope of the project," she said. "Can we do more? Always."

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