

## Calkins: An assessment of the county's mussel prevention efforts

Contributed by Ed Calkins  
Thursday, 04 June 2009

Our local news has been covering the mussel exposure to Lake County and the actions to prevent it very aggressively recently. This is good as public awareness is key to prevention. However it is also frustrating as those that have been tracking this high-risk situation for years realize that we have done little if anything to really prevent it from getting here.

Our "mussel task force" has resulted in a lot of time from many volunteers to try and put a plan and actions together to combat this threat within the limitations of limited funds while trying to please everyone involved. Many have done the politically correct action to tell of the "excellent job" they are doing. I will be the bad guy and conclude they have accomplished little if anything tangible to stop the threat, while acknowledging they have made a great effort.

First of all I will repeat the threat, the economy of Lake County will be severely impacted by these mussels getting into our lake. The ecology of the lake will change forever. Those of us that are both emotionally and financially invested in the county will see property values plummet much farther than expected. Property taxes will be reduced.

A financially challenged county will become a financially ruined county as the tourist industry will all but go away. Lake water users including agriculture will see their costs soar. Someday hopefully an eradication treatment for mussels will be developed, today it does not exist. We can only hope to keep them out until the treatment is available and effective.

We have known of this threat for years; in 2005 the Board of Supervisors was alerted to the potential westward spread of the mussels. In early 2007 the Board of Supervisors was told the mussels had reached Southern California.

Initial (2005) reactions were that Lake County did not need to be saddled with another negative marketing image (i.e. algae, weeds and mussels) so keep it low key and then when the threat increased many (correctly) assumed the state should be the first responder.

Finally (2007) the Board of Supervisors initiated the mussel task force to ensure that we locally did everything possible to protect our lakes and economy when it was obvious the state was not stepping up to the task.

When one objectively looks at where we are today we find public awareness at a much greater level than it was two years ago when the local effort got started. But concrete actions that could stop the mussels from getting here or at least lower the probability significantly have been discussed at length but have not happened. I contend we are at risk as much today as we were two years ago.

A couple of examples: A friend went to a local resort (I will leave the name out) to get mussel stickers for an out-of-area visitor's boat on Memorial Day. There was no attempt to determine where the boat was recently or what the risk level was (a key part of the local prevention plan), there was no discussion of the importance of the program, no focus on the affidavit the boat owner was asked to sign — no sense of urgency whatsoever. It was just a troublesome transaction, sign here and give us \$10. and here are your stickers. Nothing gained to prevent mussels.

Most of the visiting boats today are either bass boats or wakeboard boats. The bass fishermen as a group are probably among the most knowledgeable and careful regarding the mussel threat, although they are also likely to have been in Lake Mead or other infested lakes.

The wakeboard boats frequently visit us from Southern California and many of them have ballast tanks that take on hundreds of gallons of water to make them heavier and enlarge wakes. Those ballast tanks always have some water in them and can contain live mussels or veligers for long periods of time. To this day we do not treat these ballast tanks when these boats go into Clear Lake and fill and dump their tanks (a small amount of Clorox would eliminate the risk). Therefore, after countless hours of effort and discussion, our lake remains unprotected.

What could be done to prevent or minimize the threat:

1. Close the lake to out of county boats. Most effective but not acceptable due to the impact on the economy. Other California lakes have done this until a protection or eradication plan is determined and proven effective.
2. Stop all boats on roadways accessing the county to force inspection and treatment of at-risk boats. If this could be implemented and funded it would be pretty effective. For many reasons it is not feasible nor affordable.
3. Stop all at-risk boats from entering the lake by controlling all launch ramps. We have close to 600 private and public lake access ramps, very difficult to impossible to implement and fund (Tahoe has a plan like this).
4. The highest risk to Northern California lakes (and the delta water system) is from boats coming from southern California and Arizona. Almost 100 percent of these boats will use one of three roadways to get here (I-5, 99 or 101), three state checkpoints properly implemented could considerably lower the risk to us. This has been discussed for at least two years but not yet implemented.
5. A sticker plan to ensure that every user of our lake has signed an affidavit stating that he or she acknowledges the risk and personally assumes the responsibility to ensure that they do not spread mussels into Lake County could be very effective and is affordable. Significant penalties defined for failure to sign the affidavit and display the sticker (\$1,000?) and significant legal action to anyone proven to have exposed the lake to mussels (e.g. \$10,000 and loss of boat or ?) is key. Such a program that was enforced and had publicity through boating periodicals would put users of Clear Lake on notice that if they come here they better ensure they manage the mussel risk. This is the basis of our current effort. Unfortunately, we haven't publicized it, have no meaningful fines, nor have we enforced it. We also charge a price for the stickers that is insufficient to fund the effort needed to make it work. As implemented it has very low effectiveness, properly implemented it could be much more effective.

The purpose of this assessment is not to criticize nor complement the significant effort by many county workers and

private citizens to protect the lake from these invaders. The purpose is to provide an overview of the results for the community. To date it would get a very poor rating for effectiveness.

To make the hard decisions to implement and enforce a program that puts the responsibility on the shoulders of the visiting boat owners takes strong leadership and follow-through with meaningful fines. We have had neither.

Until someone comes up with a better plan, we sorely need both.

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