

Lahontan: Saving Paiute trout worth poisoning stream



By Kathryn Reed

Anything with a gill breathing apparatus living in Alpine County's Silver King Creek is about to die.

This decision by the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Board is an attempt to preserve the Paiute cutthroat trout. This is the only place in the world where this fish lives.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife website, the Paiute was listed as endangered on March 11, 1967, and reclassified as threatened on July 16, 1975.

The problem is the California Department of Fish & Game stocked the remote wilderness area creek with nonnative fish starting in the early 1900s and ending in 1991. Those fish are the same ones the DFG now wants to kill.

Successfully poisoning waterways to rid them of nonnative species isn't something the California Department of Fish & Game has a great record with. Think Lake Davis. (Another water board handles that area of the state.)

Pumping Rotenone into the lake near Portola in 1997 was disastrous. Eighteen months later the northern pike were back. Fast forward to 2007, the lake was poisoned again. This time the nonnative pike seem to have disappeared for good – or until someone recklessly reintroduces them to the lake.

Rotenone is the same poison that will be used later this year on an 11-mile stretch of Silver King Creek. This poison was tried before starting in the 1960s and continuing into the 1990s without success.



Stafford Lehr with the Department of Fish & Game addresses the Lahontan board.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

DFG thinks its plan this time around is more comprehensive and will work. Stafford Lehr with the DFG told the board and nearly packed room at Lake Tahoe Community College that he knows his department is under a microscope and that everything is being done to ensure the project's success.

Even though the Alpine County Board of Supervisors is against the poisoning and no real economic consequences to California's smallest county have been forecast, the poisoning of the stream is going forward.

Lahontan board member Eric Sandel was the lone vote Wednesday night against the poisoning. He believes staff was too dependent on making its findings based on DFG data and not enough independent study was used to come to the recommendation.

Former board member Laurel Ames is against the poisoning, pointing out how Rotenone is banned in some areas and it has links to Parkinson's disease. She also took issue with how long the EIR/EIS has been available to the public.

Anyone with "trout" in their organization's name spoke in favor of the plan.

Executive Director Harold Singer added more monitoring to the plan.

The area will essentially be dead for three to four years. Once it's determined everything that should have died did die, the Paiute will be reintroduced to the creek. They will be collected from the headwaters area and put into the creek.

The DFG has also taken the Paiute cutthroat trout to locations in the Southern Sierra, beyond Lahontan's jurisdiction. This ensures the species continues to live, even if it's not in its native habitat.