

Return of native fish to spawning area hailed

By Martin Griffith, AP

RENO – Scientists are hailing the return of a threatened fish to its home spawning grounds in Nevada for the first time in 76 years, calling it a milestone in efforts to re-establish a self-sustaining population of the species at a desert lake near Reno.

About 90 Lahontan cutthroat trout weighing up to 25 pounds spawned this spring along the extreme lower two-mile section of the Truckee River, which flows over 100 miles from Lake Tahoe to Pyramid Lake, U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials announced last week.

Pyramid's cutthroats last spawned in the river in 1938 and died out by the 1940s because of overfishing, degraded habitat and the introduction of non-native fish. They also vanished from Tahoe around the same time for similar reasons.

Lisa Heki, fisheries complex manager for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the recent spawning activity was a surprise because of low water levels caused by a severe drought.

It offers hope that the species reintroduced into Pyramid in 2006 will be able to reproduce on its own in the future without the help of hatcheries, she said. Heki said she expects the number of cutthroats that spawn in the Truckee to keep increasing.

"It confirms this strain retains its capacity to reproduce naturally and it's ready to take advantage of the stream to spawn," she told the Associated Press. "I think we're on the steps of a new era for this species. It's pretty exciting."

Terence James, vice chairman of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, agreed. His tribe's hatchery has raised cutthroat that originated from outside the Truckee basin since 1974.

"It's a very exciting success story for the tribe," he told the *Reno Gazette-Journal*, which broke the story about the spawning activity on the lower Truckee. "We haven't seen this happen for a very long time."

Officials counted 182 spawning areas along the lower Truckee where cutthroat males and females paired up to lay and fertilize eggs.

Heki said that while it's uncertain whether any of the areas produced fry that survived, it's likely that cutthroats would have more spawning success in a wet year.

The goal is to allow the species to get past a couple of dams on the lower Truckee and spawn around Reno and other upstream areas as it once did, she said.

Nevada's state fish, the cutthroat is prized by anglers because of its taste and size. A record 41-pound cutthroat was caught at Pyramid in 1925, and specimens weighing up to 25 pounds have been reeled in over the last year.

A recovery team also is considering a long-term effort to restore the cutthroat at Lake Tahoe, Heki said, but officials first want to re-establish a self-sustaining population of the species at Fallen Leaf Lake.

"I think this strain would perform quite well at Lake Tahoe," Heki said. "Long-term, with community involvement and support, I think it's definitely feasible to have them there."