



Monday, Jun 21, 2010

Posted on Thu, Jun. 17, 2010

Don't move a mussel into our lakes

Phil Dirx

Quaggas have already invaded some Southern California lakes. They will soon invade lakes around here if we let them.

Quaggas sound like science-fiction, but they aren't, although they are an invasive alien species and our county is on alert to repel them.

Quagga mussels are tiny freshwater shellfish originally from Eastern Europe. Water and parks officials in San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties are drafting all boaters this summer to combat these invaders.

Quaggas are no bigger than a pat of butter, but they're huge in numbers — one female can lay 1 million eggs a year. Quaggas can affix themselves tightly to anything including each other. Masses of them clump together on docks and boat hulls and on the outsides and insides of pipes. They clog boat engines, pumps, valves and hydro-electric generators.

Quagga mussels and their smaller relatives, zebra mussels, arrived in America in the 1980s. Their larvae were carried in ballast water that ocean-going freighters discharged into the Great Lakes.

From there, they migrated to Midwestern and Eastern rivers and lakes.

They probably came "out West" on a boat towed on a trailer. Quaggas can live out of water three to five days and longer still in a boat's bilge water.

The first ones in the West were reported in Lake Meade near Hoover Dam on Jan. 6, 2007.

So now, boaters can expect some level of inspection at the lakes in San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties. The watchwords are clean, drain and dry. Before you launch your craft it must thoroughly be cleaned and drained of all water, and all things that will touch lake water, including anchors and garments, must be dry.

The Nacimiento Pipeline Project managers are concerned about keeping Nacimiento Lake free of quagga and zebra mussels, which could clog the \$176 million pipeline and the water systems of the five communities it serves.

Nacimiento is the only local lake that's surrounded by private property with many privately owned launching sites. But a spokeswoman for the Nacimiento Pipeline, Christine Halley, said the owners and managers of lakeside properties are willingly cooperating with the inspection program. And both she and Monterey County Deputy Chief Park Ranger Thomas Shepherd said boaters are also willingly cooperating.

I downloaded a self-inspection form for Nacimiento and San Antonio lakes at www.slocountywater.org by clicking on the quagga mussels quick link for the PDF titled Don't Move a Mussel Brochure at the bottom of the page.

You can also learn about inspections at Lopez and Santa Margarita lakes by clicking their line.

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