ChicoER.com

Fish lost and found among talks at AquAlliance conference

By HEATHER HACKING-Staff Writer
Posted: 12/03/2012 12:03:35 AM PST

CHICO — While much of the discussion at AquAlliance's water conference Thursday and Friday was about major waterways and big-picture fish concerns, it was the lesser-known places for fish and critters that Paul Maslin was asked to explore.

In recent year Maslin has worked with the Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve, but in the 1990s he was a professor at Chico State University and studied seasonal streams.

It was 1994 when the winter-run salmon was listed as endangered, and salmon suspected to be winter-run were spotted in Mud Creek.

Maslin reported the findings to the Department of Fish and Game and began a research project with help from four students.

The conclusion was that wildlife happens, even in a place thought to be just a ditch.

The group looked at creeks, many which seasonally ran dry, in 33 tributaries leading to the Sacramento River. Many were considered drainage canals by local property owners.

Over four years, the study found fish in such waterways as far as 12 kilometers (about 71Ž2 miles) from the river.

The numbers were "trivial" compared to the number of fish on the river, but the results also indicated the fish were fatter when compared to fish in other waterways, Maslin said. DNA samples also confirmed they were winter-run fish.

Maslin said his group documented about two dozen fish species, and more than 90 percent of them were native.

What was also fascinating were the species of chorus frogs, Western toads and spadefoot toads that reproduced in these areas.

Insects were also found to be "specialists" of perennial streams, creatures that have a short lifecycles and can snap back after dry waterways are refilled.

"Organisms find a way of using available habitat by having a lifecycle with resting eggs or being migratory," he explained.

Looking back

Other very timely topics were explored at the conference, which had about 75 attendees Thursday at Sierra Nevada Brewing Co.'s Big Room.

Some of the speakers talked about historic bad decisions along waterways that contributed to problems with fish and the environment today.

Felix Smith had a career of 35 years as a Fish and Wildlife biologist and was involved with public trust issues long before major decisions on Mono Lake.

The public trust doctrine is the source of many lawsuits, and includes litigation to protect species and resources for the public.

Smith also talked about decisions made in the 1950s to divert water from the San Joaquin River.

"We got a memo that Fish and Wildlife Service could not protest for the needs of salmon on the San Joaquin River because all of the water was necessary for ag," Smith said.

Half a century later, billions of dollars are proposed to reintroduce salmon and habitat along that waterway.

Smith went on to describe what he considers other public trust violations he witnessed during this career, and said there are no "statute of limitations" for filing suits for past violations.

He now advocates corrections to past damage to wildlife, proof that corrections are working, and continued monitoring.

Tom Stokely, of California Water Impact Network, talked about a "trail of broken promises" on the Trinity River.

In the 1960s water from the Trinity River was diverted to the Sacramento River, and at that time local county leaders were promised that local demands would be met and fish would not be harmed, Stokely said.

The Whiskeytown Lake dedication included a visit by President John F. Kennedy. The dam was lauded for preventing the waste of water by letting water run to the sea, Stokely said.

Almost immediately after dams on the Trinity River were built, sediment filled pools, and temperatures became harmful to fish, he continued.

Work began in the early 1970s to talk about increased water flows, but then the state experienced severe drought and the topic was stalled, he said.

Lawsuits and laws followed for decades, and in 2000, with a lot of effort by the Hoopa Valley Tribe, it looked like things were on the road for improvement, he said. But currently biological opinions have been going back and forth.

What needs to happen, Stokely said, is for water deliveries that include water from the Trinity to be eliminated. Also, storage in the Trinity system needs to be set at a point that can withstand a drought, or fish will die, he said.

The topics were part of a discussion on how to move forward on these issues in the future.

Staff writer Heather Hacking can be reached at 896-7758, hhacking@chicoer.com and followed on Twitter @HeatherHacking.