

ONE FLEW OVER THE MAMMOTH CREEK

By Giles

If you thought you saw Nurse Ratchet on Mammoth Creek last week, well, you were mistaken. What you did see were local workers for the non-profit California Trout surveying the stream to collect data about the population, size, distribution, and species of fish in the creek.

But yes, they did have one thing in common with Nurse Ratchet of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" fame. They were carrying electroshock backpacks.

The team, comprised of California Trout employees and local volunteers, wore rubber waders and carried the aforementioned backpacks. Two shockers delivered a mild current to stream, while netters waded against the current to net the momentarily stunned fish. Once netted, the fish were measured and weighed. In some cases, tissue samples were taken for laboratory analysis by Ross Taylor and Associates.

California Trout's Eastern Sierra Manager, Dr. Mark Drew, said the crews spent six days working on the creek. They built temporary, natural barriers from rocks and netting in the stream to isolate "reaches" of stream that exactly mirrored previous population surveys. A total of seven reaches were surveyed between the confluence of Mammoth Creek and Hot Creek, and Upper Mammoth Creek.

"Very preliminarily, we found there to be in the upper reaches a number of young of the year and small trout,

which is telling that spawning behavior in Mammoth Creek is doing well," said Drew in an interview this week. Drew added that researchers were "pleasantly surprised" by the number of larger rainbow and brown trout observed downstream, particularly because the Creek literally dried up during the height of the drought in 2015.

According to Drew, Mammoth Community Water District (MCWD) was responsible for conducting annual fish population surveys for over a decade prior to 2008, when the last population survey of fish in Mammoth Creek was conducted.

In 2014, California Trout completed a water quality study of Mammoth Creek and detected mercury levels well above the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board's standards in Mammoth Creek, at Mill City Stamp Mill Site. According to a 2014 Press Release from the U.S. Forest Service, subsequent sampling at the Stamp Mill revealed "elevated levels of mercury, lead and arsenic in the soil

and historic mill tailings." This means that more mercury gets flushed out of the soil when flows are higher.

The highest mercury levels were detected at the Historic Mill City Stamp Mill, indicating that is the source



of the contamination. That site is substantially downstream of MCWD's diversion for drinking water at Lake Mary, so any contamination from the mining equipment should not reach the town's water supply. In addition, just

because total mercury, the compound detected by CalTrout in 2014, is present in the creek, doesn't mean it is affecting the fish population.

"In CalTrout's study of water quality in 2014, total mercury was detected. We don't know if that total mercury is being converted into methyl mercury, the form that bioaccumulates in fish. We don't think that the harmful form of mercury that bioaccumulates (methyl mercury) is present in the fish in Mammoth Creek, but the Lahontan Regional Water Resources Control Board contracted us for this study to

make certain that methyl mercury was not somehow getting into the fish." The study will cost about \$23,000 to complete, before California Trout's staff hours or the funds provided by the Water Board for tissue sample processing. \$3,000 were allocated this week by the Mono Fisheries Commission. California Trout is seeking grants and donations to cover the remaining cost of the study.

Pat Hayes, General Manager for Mammoth Community Water District confirmed that there is not data to suggest that any mercury present in Mammoth Creek is of concern for the town's water supply, and that the areas where the compound was detected in 2014 are distinct from the town water source.

"There have been no mercury detections in our groundwater wells in the history of our well monitoring samples dating back to 1983... We monitor the production wells for inorganic contaminants on a three-year schedule, with the most recent samples taken in August of this year. Additionally, we monitor our surface water supply for inorganic contaminants on an annual basis and there have been no mercury detections in our records," said Hayes in an email.

The results of this Fall's population survey will be available in early 2017.

Pictured in photo, from left: Levi Kesze (CalTrout), Mark Drew (CalTrout) and volunteer Lisa Cutting of the Mono Lake Commitee.

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