

Saving trout too risky, critics say

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SOUTH LAKE TAHOE — A controversial program to reintroduce the threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout into the Upper Truckee River has resurfaced after four years.

Proponents of the proposed California Department of Fish and Game project say it is necessary to prevent the cutthroat from becoming extinct.

But several river neighbors are complaining that their ground water and wells could be contaminated by a poison that would be used to remove competing trout from the river before the restocking could begin.

"They're putting in poison 2½ miles from my well," says Mary Lou Mosbacher. "The preservation of that species is not worth the risk to me. If they insist on this project, I request they monitor our wells daily."

The proposed reintroduction of the Lahontan cutthroat trout needs approval from the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Board and the Tahoe Re-

gional Planning Agency. The water board plans to meet to discuss the plan on July 14 at Kings Beach.

Fish and Game biologist Eric Gursten says the cutthroat were abundant in the Sierra Nevada until the 1920s, but began to disappear because of water diversions and increased competition from other trout.

Now, there is no naturally producing population of Lahontan cutthroat trout in the Tahoe Basin.

Gursten says his department first talked about reintroducing the threatened species in 1984 but plans did not work out, partly because of vocal opposition.

Under the latest proposal, live brook trout would be removed later this summer from several mountain lakes and a four- to six-mile stretch of the Upper Truckee near its headwaters.

Fish would be stunned electrically and taken to Showers Lake a mile west of the river. The fish poison, rotenoe, would be used to kill any remaining trout in the lakes and river. Another chemical,

potassium permanganate, would be used to neutralize the rotenoe.

Fish and Game biologist Jim Ryan says the chemical treatment would be repeated next summer until all the trout are gone.

Then 200 adult Lahontan cutthroat trout would be planted. Biologists hope they would produce up to 1,000 more during the next five years in the Upper Truckee river and Meiss and Four lakes.

The other trout must be removed for the Lahontan cutthroat to survive, Ryan says. "Cutthroats can't compete with other brook trout. They couldn't get a foothold."

The rotenoe poison is an organic chemical that "doesn't get into the ground water and is no threat to people or animals," according to Ryan.

But tell that to the Christmas Valley neighbors upset with the proposal.

"I just don't believe any pesticides or toxic chemicals should be placed in a Tahoe tributary," says Upper Truckee Road resident Don Meuser.