

# Unique trout could return to Tahoe

By RICK FOLSTAD

**SOUTH LAKE TAHOE** — The U.S. Forest Service is trying to bring the Lahontan cutthroat trout back to its native waters in the Tahoe Basin, although part of the plan might require sacrificing other species of trout.

Once a primary game fish throughout Lake Tahoe and its feeder streams, the magnificent Lahontan cutthroat has gone the way of the dinosaur within the Tahoe Basin. Pure strains of the trout still exist, but the scattered populations are found only outside the basin's rim.

"In the late 1920s, there were more than 4,000 miles of stream inhabited by the cutthroat in both Nevada and California," said Eric Gerstung, a fishery biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game. "Now there's probably less than 12 miles of cutthroat stream in California with a little more than that in Nevada, mostly in the Humboldt River. There's a small hybrid population living in Cascade Lake, but the pure strain has vanished from the basin."

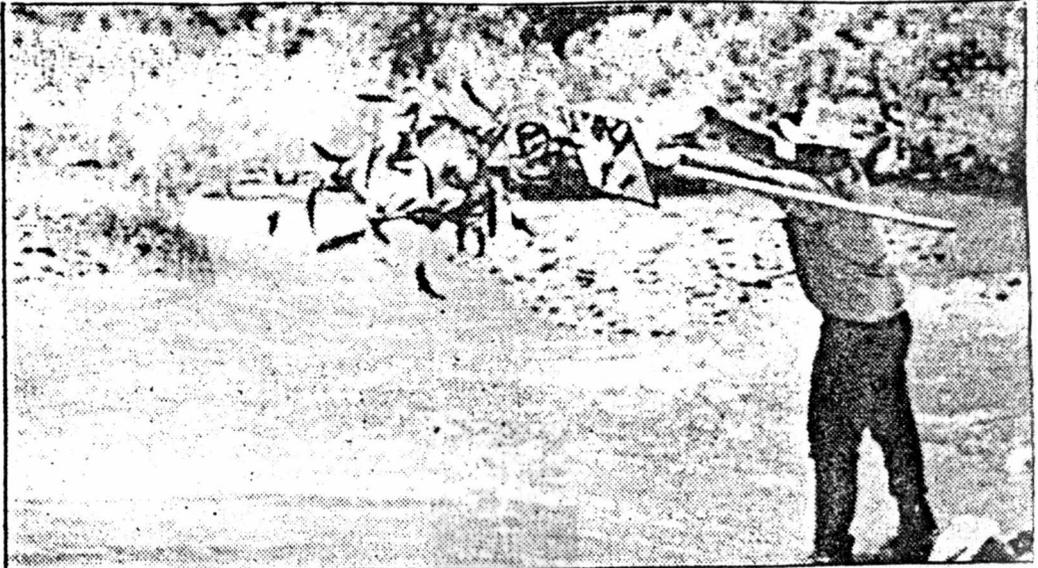
Gerstung said the more aggressive and competitive brook and rainbow trout drove the Lahontan trout to the brink of extinction. And the only way to bring the trout back, is to eliminate its competition.

"The most effective way to eliminate the more competitive fish is through the use of chemicals," said Steve Widowski, a wildlife biologist with the Forest Service's Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. "We've used other methods such as electric shock, but it never gets all the fish. We have to be certain all the fish are gone, or they'll eventually drive the cutthroat out again. Draining can be done on some streams, but not on those streams we're hoping to reintroduce the cutthroat to."

The chemical that the forest service and the fish and game department are planning to use is a poison known as rotenone. Registered and approved by both the Environmental Protection Agency and California, rotenone works by inhibiting the uptake of oxygen in the fish. According to Widowski, the poison would be added to the water drop by drop with the streams being detoxified immediately after application.

An environmental assessment of the proposal is planned for the end of May by the forest service, in conjunction with the Department of Fish and Game.

If the assessment proves positive, the project would begin in late September or



**TROUT PLANTING:** Fishery experts will use trout planting techniques like this to return the Lahontan cutthroat to Tahoe.

early October, when the tourist season slows. Scheduled to be introduced to a very limited area, the poison would have no adverse effect on animal life other than the fish, forest service officials said. After treatment, the water purity will be checked.

"The process would involve two chemical treatments, one each year," said Widowski. "One of the primary areas for stocking the cutthroat are the headwaters of the Upper Truckee and the Meiss and Four Lakes which feed the Upper Truckee, south of Lake Tahoe. The area includes three to five miles of stream and approximately 37 surface acres of water."

Outside the basin, portions of the Carson and Walker Rivers may also be treated and stocked with the cutthroat.

Widowski said the Upper Truckee is presently populated with brook and golden trout. If the project is approved and the brook and golden are eliminated, natural barriers, such as waterfalls, will prevent the brook and golden from re-entering the restocked waters. The barriers will also allow greater control of the cutthroat.

The forest service is involved in helping plan and monitor the project," continued Widowski. "The fish and game department will do the actual stocking."

Gerstung stressed the fact that once the

rotenone is added to the water, there is no danger of the poison spreading.

"The use of the poison will be very controlled and very limited," he said. "We've received phone calls from individuals who are worried the poison will somehow reach Lake Tahoe, but we'll be using the rotenone in a very small area far from the lake and isolated through natural barriers. Once the cutthroat take hold in the stocked areas, the fishing should improve. The brook trout in the Upper Truckee have become stunted due to over population, while the Lahontan cutthroat averages 10 to 14 inches in length."

Gerstung said another factor which contributed to the decline of the cutthroat in the basin in the early part of this century was the fishing industry.

"Commercial and private fishing took a heavy toll on the cutthroat. When their numbers began to decline, the drop in population left an ecological vacuum and the mackinaw trout in Lake Tahoe filled the gap. The Lahontan cutthroat never recovered."

"The last run of the cutthroat out of Lake Tahoe was in 1938," Gerstung continued. "The fish will never survive again in Lake Tahoe because of the strong mackinaw population. But in other areas, we'd like to bring the fish population back to what was prior to 1920."