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Officials say progress at Lake Elsinore overshadowed by fish die-offs

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By AARON BURGIN
The Press-Enterprise

Dominique Gagnon, a wake boarder from Orange County, hits Lake Elsinore every weekend.

It's the closest suitable body of water. But she's still disgusted by the thought of that first plunge into the water on Sunday, when she found herself floating among millions of dead minnows.

"This is a sight that won't get out of my mind," Gagnon said.

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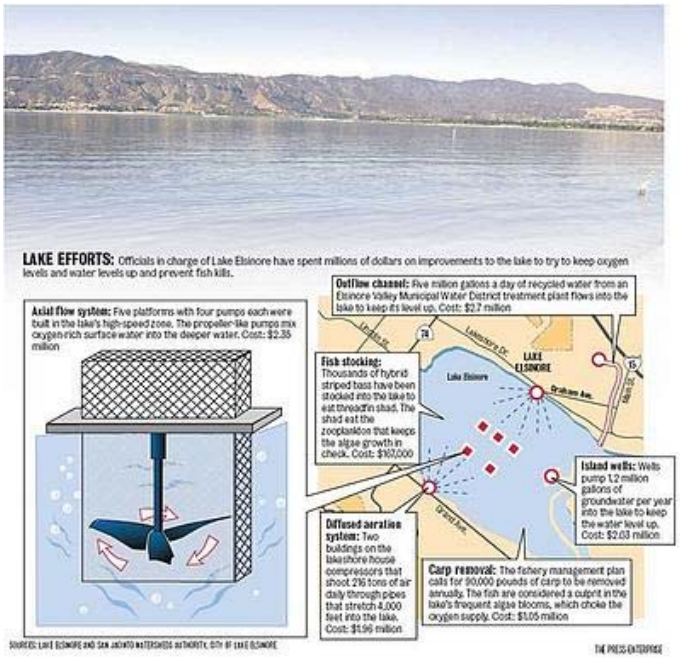

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The lake's first two major fish die-offs since 2002 have put officials charged with weaning Lake Elsinore back to health where they were years ago: How to keep visitors like Gagnon from bolting from the lake for good.

They say the plan drawn up years ago and the millions spent keeping the lake healthy are working, as are the dollars they have spent marketing the location.

City officials deny the latest rumor: that one of the five fans that mixes the lake water and keeps it oxygenated

was turned off to save power costs. They did say that with the current water level, one of the stations is turned off because it is ineffective.

"A lot of work has been done to make people aware of the benefits of the lake," said Mark Norton, an engineer with the Lake Elsinore and San Jacinto Watersheds Authority. That agency, formed in 2000, has spent $15 million in water bond money to clean up Southern California's largest naturally occurring lake and the 735-square-mile watershed that feeds it.

Projects have focused on keeping the lake levels from rising and falling and managing certain fish species.

To prevent the fish kills would require more expensive measures, such as making the lake deeper or infusing it with pure oxygen, which would cost $70 million and $18 million respectively, they say.

"We knew we only had $15 million, so we did the most cost-effective projects that had proven to be effective in other lakes," Norton said. "Was it money well spent? Yes, indeed."

After seven years without a major fish die-off, officials felt this summer was Lake Elsinore's coming-out party.

The city spent $11,000 for a contract with TV fishing personality Ronnie Kovach to produce a show touting the lake's comeback. The show is scheduled to run six times this year. A popular fishing magazine also touted the lake's success story.

And then, within three weeks, millions of fish died, evoking images of Lake Elsinore of yesteryear. Some anglers and visitors vowed never to return to the lake.

Officials with the City of Lake Elsinore, Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District and the Watersheds Authority have been quick to assert that the most recent incident, which killed more than 10 million small threadfin shad, probably did more good for the lake than anything.

The shad, whose population had exploded to nearly 30 million in recent years, are primary culprits in previous fish kills and algae blooms because they eat the zooplankton which feed on the algae growth.

Less zooplankton means more algae, which means less oxygen for fish, which results in fish dying.

Norton likened the death to a wildfire that purges a forest of dead trees and overgrowth.

"People are upset that the fires occur, but it is also a natural process," Norton said. "The fish die-offs, while unpleasant, bring the lake back into balance."

Both fish kills were followed by quick cleanups, officials also emphasize. Most of the fish in the most recent incident were off of the lake by Wednesday, and campgrounds, beaches and the boat launches remained open, Lake Elsinore Mayor Bob Magee said.

Magee said that convincing people that the lake is healthy and still a viable tourist option will be difficult because of the media attention given to the fish kills.

"The public doesn't see the fact that a near 50 percent reduction in a bait fish is a good thing," Magee said. "What the public sees is that picture of the 7 or 8-year-old girl with a stick, poking at a big, dead fish."

Still, some visitors, like Gagnon, believe the city needs to address the problem, or it will lose visitors.

"There has to be a change with this lake or that city is going to go under," Gagnon said.

Staff writer John Hill contributed to this report.

Reach Aaron Burgin at 951-375-3733 or aburgin@PE.com