

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Quarry Lakes on leading edge of lead ban

Carolyn Jones

Monday, March 18, 2013

The Quarry Lakes are hardly pristine. The nearly treeless former industrial site in Fremont is engulfed by development and traffic.

But the lakes are among the cleanest around, thanks to a ban on lead fishing tackle that's thought to be the only such ban in the state.

"They are on the forefront of this, but I'm sure it's the wave of the future. It's a great idea," said Pete Alexander, fisheries manager of the East Bay Regional Park District.

The program by the Alameda County Water District allows anglers to trade in their lead weights and sinkers for steel equivalents. Visitors can make the free trade at the entrance kiosk any time the park is open. In the 10 years since the program began, staffers have collected more than 1,000 pounds of lead, which they sell to metal recyclers. The proceeds are used to buy more steel tackle to swap.

The purpose is to keep lead out of the lakes, which provide drinking water to Fremont, Union City and Newark. The lead ban is also good for birds, fish and other animals that are easily poisoned by ingesting the toxic metal.

"I live in Fremont and I happen to drink that water, so I think it's an excellent idea," said Regina Casassa, a ranger at Quarry Lakes. "And the fish don't seem to care."



Anglers can trade their lead weights like these for steel ones at Quarry Lakes in Fremont, where officials have banned lead tackle. Photo: Brant Ward, The Chronicle

Lead, water don't mix

Quarry Lakes - a cluster of five lakes connected to Alameda Creek - is on the site of a 100-year old quarry that was turned over to park and water districts in the 1970s. The 450-acre park opened for recreation in 2001. Soon after that, the water district implemented the ban.

"Our initial thought was, lead? Drinking water? Not compatible," said Marion Gonzalez, environmental specialist for the water district. "It's not like we saw a bunch of dead birds lying around, but we knew it wasn't good for wildlife. Or people."

Loons, swans, cranes, ducks and other waterfowl mistake the lead weights for pebbles, which they eat to aid digestion. In New

England, lead poisoning was found in nearly 50 percent of dead loons, according to a 2004 study by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Several New England states have restricted lead fishing tackle, but few such crackdowns exist in the West. In California, numerous state agencies, and at least one legislator, are studying the matter, said a spokesman for the California Environmental Protection Agency.

EPA considered ban

Among other issues, the state is looking for reasonable alternatives, such as steel, glass or ceramic tackle, before enacting a ban, spokesman Jim Marxen said.

The U.S. EPA looked into the issue last year but declined to take action, although smaller park and water districts, including the East Bay Regional Park District, are poised to move forward.

“We’ve put so much effort into removing lead from gas, paint, toys. ... Fishing tackle is one of the last places we still allow lead,” said Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity in San Francisco, which petitioned the EPA for a ban. “Lead is poisonous wherever it is.”

Even fishing tackle manufacturers admit lead is toxic. The problem with a ban, though, is that anglers have few options. Other materials, such as steel, are more expensive and not as effective, said Mary Jane Williamson, spokeswoman for the American Sportfishing Association.

“We’re all for helping fish mortality. And we’re definitely for innovation. If there was a viable alternative, we’d be all for it,” she said.

At Walton’s Pond tackle shop in San Leandro, two 1-ounce steel sinkers cost \$1.75, twice the price of lead. Generally, anglers prefer lead because it’s less expensive, more malleable and denser, a shop manager said.

Anglers agree

But at Quarry Lakes last week, fishermen said they didn’t care either way. All but one were using steel or plastic tackle as they perched by the lakeside casting for trout and catfish.

“Lead’s a little heavier and you can cast farther, but it’s bad for the fish,” said Michael Pereira, a retired car parts salesman from Newark. “The fish here are good and firm and clean. I like that.”

Stephen Rivera of Newark, a training specialist at Cisco, was also happy to use steel tackle.

“It’s more expensive, but it’s safer,” he said. “I don’t even know why they make lead tackle. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Lisa Sweeney, a pharmacy cashier from San Ramon, didn’t know about the ban on lead tackle but said she’d switch.

“We like it here, the beauty of it. It’s so peaceful,” she said. “And we like to take care of the places we go.”