



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

An egret takes flight after catching a fish in Pinto Lake on Monday, as officials were briefed on solutions to heavy blooms of toxic blue green algae at the popular South County recreation spot.

POISONED LAKE

Watsonville - 2000

9.24.13

STATE LEADERS BRIEFED ON TOXIC ALGAE BLOOMS

By DONNA JONES

djones@santacruzsentinel.com

✓ WATSONVILLE — A great white egret skimmed across the sun-sparkled surface of Pinto Lake on Monday morning and landed in the shadow of a stand of tule by the shore. Across the water, a fisherman cast his line from a rowboat. Ducks splashed in the shallows.

The scene appeared idyllic. The lake is not.

On the shore, researchers briefed state legislators and officials from state and local agencies on the poison polluting the 8,000-year-old lake in southern Santa Cruz County, a popular recreation spot for many and a sacred site to some.

The problem is cyanobacteria, more commonly known as blue-green algae. The seasonal algal blooms that plague the lake release microcystin and other deadly toxins linked to deaths in sea otters and water birds. It's likely sickened people who have come into contact with the waters as well, though cases haven't been documented, researchers said.

"This lake gets really, really toxic," said Raphael Kudela, UC Santa Cruz ocean sciences professor. "It's the most toxic we've found in California."

It's so toxic, signs warn against eating fish caught in the lake, and people must sign waivers acknowledging the danger of coming into contact with the water before launching boats at the city park.

In 2007, the deaths of at least a dozen sea

SEE PINTO ON A4

**'This lake gets really, really toxic.
It's the most toxic we've found
in California.'**

RAPHAEL KUDELA, UC Santa Cruz
ocean sciences professor



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Algae blooms fill the water near the docks at Pinto Lake park.



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Santa Cruz County Water Resources Division Director John Ricker briefs officials, including State Assemblyman Luis Alejo, seated at far right, on the challenges and possible solutions to heavy algae blooms at Pinto Lake on Monday.

PINTO

Continued from A1

otters were traced to microcystin poisoning, according to Dr. Melissa Miller, a veterinarian with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, who said the number of otter fatalities due to the toxin has risen to at least 40 since then.

"It's probably not the first time it happened, just the first it was recognized," Miller said of the 2007 incident.

Miller said marine invertebrates, a food source for otters, filter toxin-laden waters and concentrate the poison in their tissues.

Otters aren't the only victim. In 2011, numerous coots, a water bird with a dark body and white bill, began exhibiting strange behavior, including flying into cars and buildings near the sloughs on Watsonville's west side.

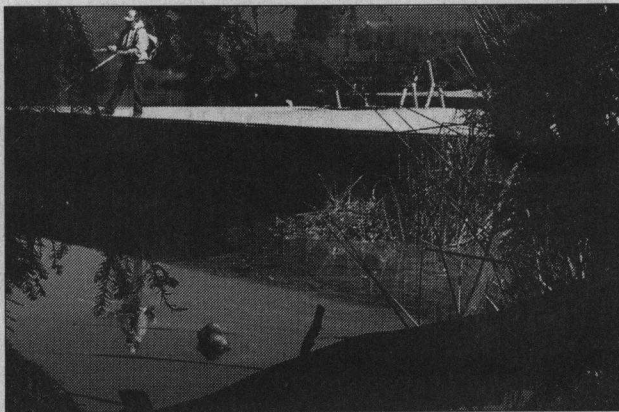
Dead birds turned up and were autopsied, and again microcystin turned up as the culprit, according to Robert Ketley, the city's water quality specialist.

Cyanobacteria is a problem in lakes worldwide, and researchers said Pinto is not the only waterway impaired in the state. But the relatively small size of Pinto and its 1,400-acre watershed, as well as the diverse uses of the surrounding land make it an ideal laboratory for studying the problem and developing solutions.

Farms, homes and public parks surround the lake.

Previous research has shown phosphorus in sediments laid down in the bottom of the lake over decades fuel the algae blooms. What's less clear is the impact of current runoff from septic systems and agricultural fields. It's an issue researchers are keen to explore.

Assemblyman Luis Alejo,



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

An angler fishes near an area of algae bloom at Pinto Lake on Monday.

D-Watsonville, who attending the briefing along with state Sen. Bill Monning, D-Monterey, recalled family outings to the lake as a boy, and the vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe on a tree at its edge that attracted thousands of pilgrims in the 1980s and continues to draw devotees today. The lake is home to wildlife and its waters

end up in the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, he said.

As the area's representative and as chairman of the Assembly Committee on Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials, he pledged to seek state and federal funding to clean up the lake.

"It's a special place," Alejo said.