

20 years later, Dunsmuir spill site revisited

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DUNSMUIR, Calif. (KGO) -- It's been nearly 20 years since a Northern California chemical spill turned into the largest inland environmental disaster in state history. It happened when a train derailed near Dunsmuir and thousands of gallons of herbicide spilled into the Upper Sacramento River. Two decades later we returned to see what's happened since.

Where the Mount Shasta snow meets the Upper Sacramento River, you will find one of the premier fly-fishing and outdoor recreation areas in the nation. However, there was a time when it wasn't this way.

In 1991, a Southern Pacific train derailed on the Cantara Loop near Dunsmuir. It didn't just cause a wreck, it created an environmental disaster and crippled the local economy; 19,000 gallons of the herbicide metam sodium poured into the Upper Sacramento River. It was so toxic it was three days before scientists were even allowed near the water.

"We were loading up several garbage bags full of dead fish. It wasn't just fish though, it was crayfish, it was sculpin, it was hordes of invertebrates, aquatic insects, salamanders," said Department of Fish and Game biologist Neil Manji.

Almost every living organism in 38 miles of the river was dead.

"It's amazing to see how resilient and how fast the river can come back," said Manji.

"It started to recover within a week," said Mark Stopher who is in charge of monitoring the site for the Department of Fish and Game. "Probably within three to four years the fish populations were essentially recovered."

Stopher says the long-term effects have been minimal. Thanks in part to a three-year fishing ban on the river, the fish came back on their own. In fact, by 2005 research showed most fish species had completely recovered. That was the last time the Department of Fish and Game took a comprehensive look at the river. But now an environmental group has been looking into it.

"It's a mixed bag," said Rene Henery with the environmental group The River Exchange. "My sort of main take away from the incident is that the river is fundamentally changed."

Henery has been studying the river and says there is evidence that some species are still struggling to find a place in this new river.

"I think based on the research that was done, it seems likely that amphibian populations probably haven't recovered," said Henery.

Henery says more research needs to be done, but the Department of Fish and Game says there's no money.

"We have a lot of need for resource assessment and monitoring," said Stopher. "I wouldn't say though that the Upper Sacramento River is the highest priority for us."

It wasn't just wildlife that died when the river was poisoned -- the town of Dunsmuir suffered, too. Businesses that depended on tourism struggled to stay open.

"Some of them actually went out of business and most of them were impacted on the number of visitors that they had for several years," said Dunsmuir Chamber of Commerce president David Clarno.

Clarno says economic recovery took years, but things are largely back to normal.

Cave Springs Resort owner Louie Dewey was one of the lucky ones. Immediately after the spill his resort business was in big trouble.

"What worried us was that the perception would persist and the perception is what kills the economy," he said.

But Dewey says tourists came back within a year. The sport fisherman came back, too. Today in the community there's a sense they got lucky.

"There could have been a lot worse things □ chlorine, hydrochloric acid -- you know all the things that are trucked along here, trained along here, could have had a more lasting effect," said Curtis Knight of California Trout.

Southern Pacific merged with Union Pacific in the mid-90s and made changes to the infamous Cantara Loop along the Sacramento River.

"We've installed a high strength barrier there on that curve that we hope, should there ever be an incident there again, would help avoid any kind of tank car ending up in the river again," said Aaron Hunt of Union Pacific.

The railroad installed a monument as an eternal reminder of what happened there 20 years ago, and a symbol of how nature can recover given the time. Most people agree that another spill is inevitable because so many roadways and railroad tracks cross waterways. But thanks to the Cantera spill, they are armed with the knowledge of how to respond to such a disaster more effectively in the future.

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