

Crews wade into mosquito fight at Pinto Lake: California Conservation Corps partners with county to clear clogged waterway

By DONNA JONES *Santa Cruz Sentinel*

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WATSONVILLE -- As if the weather wasn't wet enough, several blue-helmeted California Conservation Corps members waded into chilly waist-deep water to clear aquatic plants from Pinto Lake on Monday.

During the past few days, the 12-member crew has cleared tons of native pennywort and smartweed as well as invasive Ludwigia, or water primrose, that have choked the lake and provided prime mosquito habitat.

"It's a slow slog," said crew supervisor Marcus Garrett, "but we've been able to make great progress."

So much progress, in fact, that today the crew will be able to extend the project to another section in the northern reaches of the 123-acre lake east of Watsonville.

Paul Binding said the effort will improve water quality, waterfowl habitat and access for recreational boaters. But, as manager of Santa Cruz County's Mosquito and Vector Control District, he's looking forward to being better able to tackle proliferation of the disease-carrying pest.

Binding said the aquatic vegetation was so thick it had connected a small island to the shore. But by Monday, the crews had opened a channel of open water between stands of tule.



California Conservation Corps members find themselves up to their waists in Pinto Lake on Monday as they clear vegetation to open a channel (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)



California Conservation Corp worker Michael Vera-Martinez attaches a winch to a tree to haul vegetation his crew removed from Pinto Lake on Monday (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)

aquatic vegetation, will continue to be treated from the air.

The project represents a partnership among the corps, the county and the city of Watsonville, which lent boats and life jackets to the effort. The county planned the project and supplied expertise, hip and chest waders and tools. The corps is providing 582 hours of free labor.

Brenda Herrmann, who as conservation administrator for the region oversees corps projects from San Francisco to King City, said the Pinto Lake effort is one of several on the Central Coast funded through Proposition 84, a \$5.4 billion state environmental initiative passed by voters in 2006.

Among other projects are removal of eucalyptus trees along the Pajaro River, wetlands restoration around Watsonville sloughs and planting willows at Ford Ord.



Tyler Souza wades into Pinto Lake as his California Conservation Corps crew clears a channel Monday (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)

Access by boat will permit better monitoring of mosquito populations and treatments from the water instead of the air, Binding said.

Typically, helicopters have been used monthly during the warmer months to drop biologically based granules aimed at killing mosquito larvae. Binding said sections of the lake that aren't cleared, particularly one large swath that's completely strangled by