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**Fish kill did not harm elktoe mussel**

The endangered Appalachian elktoe mussel. Scott Parrott / Times-News FILE

**The endangered Appalachian elktoe mussel survived the contamination of the Mills River and its south fork, federal biologists say.**

By [Scott Parrott](#)

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The endangered Appalachian elktoe mussel survived the contamination of the Mills River and its south fork, federal biologists say. The mussel remained under watch since last Friday, when contaminants flowed through the stream in western Henderson County, killing fish. The type of contaminant and the source remain unidentified, pending tests, but state water officials suspected agricultural pesticides. The test results should come next week, said Roy Davis of the North Carolina Division of Water Quality. Federal biologists studied the Appalachian elktoe immediately after the fish kill and found no signs of harm. But they warned days could pass before the mussel showed any signs of illness. Biologists returned Sunday and again on Thursday, checking the health of the mussels and seeing whether any died. "The elktoe mussel still looked good, so we're extremely pleased and relieved about that," said Gary Peoples of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. But to be sure, biologists may check back next week. The Appalachian elktoe's entire population is known to exist only in seven stream systems in Western North Carolina, including the Mills River. Several factors contributed to the decline and loss of populations of the Appalachian elktoe and threaten the remaining populations, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The factors include sedimentation and the run-off of fertilizers, pesticides and other pollutants. The Mills River is not the only stream where the mussel recently came under threat. Federal biologists have been surveying the Appalachian elktoe population in the Tuckasegee River in Jackson County after a dam broke in a residential development and pushed sediment down Scott's Creek and into the river. "The big difference between the Mills River and the Tuckasegee River is the amount of sediment," Peoples said. "The Mills River has much less sediment in it. Even before the dam break at Balsam Mountain Preserve, the Tuckasegee was plagued by sediment issues, and those issues are ongoing. Biologists did not find dead mussels specifically associated with the dam break, Peoples said. "But that's not because there weren't necessarily dead mussels as a result of it," Peoples said. "It's more because with all that sediment. It's harder to look for mussels, it's harder to find the mussels and if you find them, it's harder to determine what sediment source caused their death. It's more like death by a thousand cuts, all those sediment sources would contribute to the mussel issues." "With the Mills River, you had what you can expect to be a



State and federal officials are investigating a fish kill on the Mills River on July 27 which claimed hundreds of fish, including this redhorse found near the intersection of N.C. 280 and South Mills River Road. Scott Parrott / Times-News FILE

