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Rare mussel found in Mills River

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MILLS RIVER -- Donning dry suits and snorkeling gear, Jeff Simmons and Jonathan Hartsell spent almost three hours combing the bottom of the Mills River this week to rescue 315 sensitive mussels.

When the state aquatic biologists sifted through the hundreds of "slippershell" mussels, listed by North Carolina as a threatened species, they discovered a much rarer find: an Appalachian elktoe mussel.

The discovery of the federally listed endangered species where Henderson County plans to run a sewer line across the river next month has raised questions of whether more elktoe mussels are in the stream segment.

"It is my understanding that they (the county) are wanting to do the project in middle May," said John Fridell, an aquatic biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "At this point I don't know if there is a potential there could be a delay."

The Fish and Wildlife Service will consult with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which issued the permit for the county sewer line crossing, to determine if more mussel surveys are needed at the site.

The \$2.9 million sewer line the county is building through the valley is slated to cross the river just upstream of Hooper Lane and directly behind the Mills River Village subdivision. The sewer line will eliminate five small wastewater plants that discharge into the river and replace a failing septic system at Mills River Elementary School.

The state aquatic biologists were disturbed when they saw a bulldozer operator pushing dirt down a stream bank near the site where they were diving for mussels Tuesday. County officials said that grading work had nothing to do with their sewer line, and it is unclear who was operating the equipment.

One rare mussel could mean others

Three years ago, biologists for a private consulting firm discovered the Appalachian elktoe in the Mills River upstream of the N.C. 280 bridge. Henderson County then hired another consultant which combed the site where the sewer line will cross the river. They found numerous slippershell mussels but no live Elktoe and only one shell fragment from the federally listed species.

As part of its permit with the Corps of Engineers, Henderson County was required to notify the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission at least three weeks before starting construction so biologists could move the slippershell mussels. Simmons and Hartsell were doing that when they discovered the live elktoe.

Federal officials issued the permit based on the understanding that there were no living Appalachian elktoe in the area of the stream crossing, Fridell said. He said he is not expecting the discovery to delay the county project, but won't know until his agency consults with the Corps of Engineers.

The agencies may choose to survey downstream of the crossing site to see if there are more Appalachian elktoe.

The dark brown to greenish-black mussels can reach 3 inches long and were known to exist in only six other stream segments before being discovered in the Mills River.

The mussels are very sensitive to pollution, including sediment that can be stirred up during construction.

"The fact that there was one elktoe down there indicates there could be others," Fridell said as he and Simmons donned fishing waders Thursday morning to check the spot upstream where the mussels were relocated.

A construction company hired by the county plans to build a temporary dam halfway across the river to dig a trench about 3 feet wide in the stream bed to lay the sewer pipe. Workers will then fill in the stream bed over the pipe and switch the temporary dam to the other side to complete the crossing.

Henderson County engineer Gary Tweed went to the site and spoke with federal and state officials after the elktoe was discovered Tuesday. He said he does not expect the sewer line to be delayed. "They may want to go back and do another survey through there," he said. "My guess is some (elktoe) washed downstream during the high water they had last fall."

Grading practices questioned

Simmons, 26, holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in wildlife and fisheries science and a master's degree from Tennessee Tech University in biology. The Candler resident said he was disturbed to see a bulldozer operator pushing dirt down a stream bank into the river next to the site where he and Hartsell were collecting mussels. The worker may have been trying to repair a stream bank.

"Even if they were trying to grade that down they shouldn't have been pushing all that dirt straight into the river," Simmons said.

"Jonathan stuck his arm in that stuff right up to his shoulder, just loose unconsolidated stuff. That's just not something they are supposed to be doing."

Fridell visited the site Tuesday after Simmons reported the elktoe and the grading work. He said he saw bulldozer tracks leading to the stream bank but did not see any heavy equipment in operation. He said the Corps of Engineers was notified and would look into the incident.

Rebecca Dunn is a broker for Mills River Realty who was visiting her parents in Mills River Village on Tuesday. She saw both the biologists working in the stream to save the mussels and the heavy equipment dumping dirt down the bank.

Dunn said she hopes the discovery of the endangered species prompts people to take better care of the Mills River. The river supplies drinking water for thousands of Henderson County residents as well as some Asheville customers and is considered one of the cleaner streams in the region. "You always hear the bad stuff about the rivers; you don't get to hear the good stuff, how diverse the Mills River is," she said. "It is basically in good shape. I just hope it can stay that way."

