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Nearly one ton of trash removed in river cleanup

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Enterprise photos by Sean P. Thomas

Melissa Fink, left, and Lauren Korth, right, unload trash they found in the Mokelumne River near Isleton Saturday.

Volunteers on Saturday pulled nearly 1,900 pounds of trash from the lower Mokelumne River and the Delta during the Delta Loop Cleanup held by the Delta Protection Commission in partnership with East Bay Municipal District.

This was the first year the cleanup involved the Delta Loop. In the past, the cleanup day focused on the Mother Lode portions of the Mokelumne River from the West Point area to Lockeford. The Delta Protection Commission organizes river cleanups for waterways in Solano, Sacramento, Yolo, Calaveras and San Joaquin counties.

The event was part of the larger Great Sierra River cleanup, an annual event that has removed nearly 800 tons of trash and recyclables from more than 2,500 miles of rivers in 22 counties since it started seven years ago.

From 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., volunteers met at numerous locations along the river, including the south shore of Camanche Reservoir and Korth's Pirate's Lair Marina in Isleton. Those in boats surveyed the river shore for trash, while those with pickup trucks drove around Pirate's Lair Marina to help collect the Styrofoam, tires and recyclables that wash up on the shores of the river.

At Camanche Reservoir, volunteers worked with the Foothill Conservancy to pull heaps of trash from the top length of the river.

The 27 volunteers pulled 405 pounds of trash and 73 pounds of recyclables from three miles of Mokelumne shoreline.

Jeannie Matthews is the site captain for the Delta Protection Commission and participated in the event in the past as a volunteer. In the past, she said, a large number of volunteers participated in the cleanup. Taking into account that this was the first year the cleanup extended from the upper Mokelumne River to the lower part of the river, she was pleased with the amount of trash and debris the volunteers were able to remove.

"We found everything from chairs to tires," said Matthews. "We only had 16 (volunteers), but we collected quite a bit of trash for such a small group."

Melissa Fink, 41, of Isleton, was one of the last volunteers to leave Korth's Pirate's Marina. She said she felt it was her responsibility to help scour the waterways for trash after seeing the amount of trash that accumulates on the many beaches lining Highway 160.

"People that go down to fish, or people who drive down there for whatever reason, they just leave their trash everywhere," Fink said.

Fink uses the beach to collect driftwood. She said that in the past few years, she's noticed an enormous increase in the amount of litter and trash bags left on beaches.

"I think the people who go down there just don't care," said Fink. "I just don't understand how people can do that."

Both Matthews and Fink said that they weren't 100 percent sure how the bulky trash makes its way into the Delta, but agreed that the forces responsible probably commute into the area to use the river for boating or fishing.

"Some of (the trash), people simply throw into the river," said Matthews. "Some of it falls off trucks and cars and kind of falls into (the river). But most of the boaters on this river are pretty protective."

Lauren Korth, a volunteer at the event and a fourth generation member of the Korth family, said that clearing trash out of rivers like the Mokelumne is vital due to the impact it can have on the quality of the state's drinking water supply.

Matthews said that waterlogged Styrofoam was one of the common items fished out of the river and one of the most dangerous for the environment. Styrofoam used on the bottom of docks can break off and create a problem for wildlife.

Birds and fish can eat the tiny pellets that break off the Styrofoam, which can cause sickness, or in the worst cases, death. Halfway through the event, 52 pieces of Styrofoam were found in varying sizes.

Tires and vehicle parts can also be a big issue for the river's health. Automotive parts can seep harmful chemicals into the water.

"A lot of fishing happens here," said Korth. "That's the main thing. It's the only thing we have that's year round. Also, boating, skiing and tubing are big."

The Mokelumne River stretches 95 miles from the Sierra Nevada to the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. The river flows through five counties.