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Years of trash mars Sullivan Creek, cleanup planned



Barbara Balen, of Sonora, pulls discarded debris from Elsey's Pool Monday afternoon. (Maggie Beck / Union Democrat)

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The Tuolumne County Land Trust is planning to clean up trash that's been dumped and discarded by campers and other visitors over years and years deep in Sullivan Creek below Mono Way and the Sierra Railroad tracks.

There's a spot in the steep, rocky watershed with a 30-foot, gently sloping cascade splashing into a natural swimming hole. It's been known to locals for decades as Elsey's Pool, or just plain Elsey's.

To volunteer for the Sept. 16 cleanup on Sullivan Creek and to get more information, call Brian Kermeen at (209) 743-2033. For more information about the Great Sierra River Cleanup visit <http://www.sierranevada.ca.gov/our-work/rivercleanup> (<http://www.sierranevada.ca.gov/our-work/rivercleanup>) online.

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Brown-speckled mountain frogs about as big as a 25-cent piece were active Monday on gray boulders near the edge of the pool. A multi-colored graffiti mural marred a rock slope next to the burbling creek. Bags of clothing and trash, pieces of Styrofoam, camping fuel cylinders and other refuse laid in shaded places.

Regardless of who left the trash, whether it was homeless people or lawbreakers, organizers of the cleanup effort hope to clear garbage and refuse from a half-mile stretch of Sullivan Creek, including Elsey's, according to Brian Kermeen with the nonprofit land trust group.

The local effort is billed as being part of the Great Sierra River Cleanup coordinated in multiple watersheds by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy on Sept. 16.

“Look at this, it’s gorgeous,” said Barbara Balen, a Sonora-area resident who works with the Tuolumne County Land Trust, standing near the pool.

“Generations of kids have been coming down here. Where else can you find a swimming hole like this so close to downtown Sonora?”

Balen also serves as an elected member of the Tuolumne Utilities District Board of Directors. Sullivan Creek is the largest tributary flowing in and out of TUD’s Phoenix Lake reservoir, according to the public utility agency. The section of Sullivan Creek targeted for cleanup is downstream from Phoenix and it is not tapped by TUD for drinking water.

“This is an important watershed,” Balen said. “It’s worth cleaning up. We’re going to try to get the graffiti off the rocks somehow.”

It's unclear if county health and county environmental health staff have policy addressing whether Sullivan Creek below Phoenix Lake is considered safe for swimming. Michelle Jachetta, the county's health program supervisor, emergency preparedness coordinator and public information officer deferred questions to county environmental health staff, who were not available Monday afternoon.

Cleaning up and restoring this section of Sullivan Creek has been on the radar for local leaders for many years. December 2015 draft updates of the Tuolumne County General Plan and East Sonora Community Plan include mention of Elsey's Pool as a unique, natural area that contributes to the character of East Sonora.

Recent updates also say a goal for the county is to develop a regional park at Elsey's Pool to "provide opportunities for nature study and recreational pursuits."

Back in January 2016, a crew of Tuolumne County Jail inmates helped clean out remnants of a homeless camp under the Sullivan Creek bridge on Mono Way, just upstream from Elsey's Pool. They hauled out more than a dump truck load of trash including bottles, cans, burned tents, a charred couch and a handful of hypodermic needles.

Shortly after noon Monday, at least one tent was perched under the same bridge and a man and a woman were moving around near the creek in the shade. In unshaded areas near the creek, it was between 105 and 107 degrees.

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