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## Chemical pollution suspected in Parleys Creek trout die off

Up to 500 trout succumb

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A chemical spill or dump of unknown origin is the likely culprit in the deaths Tuesday of as many as 500 cutthroat trout in Parleys Creek, with dead fish littering the stream from Parleys Nature Park at the mouth of the canyon to Sugar House Park down below.

Water and fish samples were collected by several agencies, including the Salt Lake County Health Department and the Utah Department of Water Quality.

"We have some ideas, but we really can't say at this point what happened," said Mike Slater, an aquatics biologist with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR). "Things are leading us toward some kind of chemical that was spilled or put in the water."

Terry Pantuso was making his way down into the nature park with his dog Tuesday morning - the park is a popular off-leash area for dogs - when a woman heading up from the gully told him what had occurred.

"She told me there were dead fish everywhere," Pantuso said. "I was up there [Monday] and saw them swimming and [now] they are all dead."

State and federal officials, along with representatives of Trout Unlimited, converged on Parleys Creek and found the entire population of native Bonneville cutthroat in the nature park floating belly up.

Brock Richardson of Trout Unlimited walked the length of the creek at the park and counted 450 dead cutthroat. He then went to Sugar House Park, where Parleys Creek feeds the pond there, and found more dead trout.

State wildlife officials dismissed an earlier theory of a heavy silt load killing the fish and now believe there was some sort of chemical, possibly chlorine, involved.

Pam Davenport, spokeswoman for the health department, said her agency hoped to get results back from its water tests today.

She noted that the health department did not know late Tuesday what was released into the water but that whatever it was had already drifted downstream.

"At this point in time, we do not think there is a public health threat," she said.

Parleys Creek is not a drinking water source.

Dan Griffin, an environmental engineer with the state Division of Water Quality, said initial tests of the water and scouring the stream for clues all day revealed nothing unusual besides the dead fish. Other aquatic life in the stream evidently had not been harmed, he said.

He and a colleague tested the water just below the graffiti-covered concrete bridge that appeared to be the dividing line above which fish were not harmed. He said the earliest the tests results would be in is late Thursday, and some would not be available until next week.

"The water samples might point to something," he said, "or they might rule out things."

Griffin said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took around 30 of the dead fish, and sent at least one to a laboratory in Wisconsin.

Tests on the fish could reveal, for instance, whether the trout were starved for oxygen by silt or if they succumbed

to a chemical.

Parleys Creek is not a popular fishery, but it is home to a native population of Bonneville cutthroat trout whose proposed inclusion on the Endangered Species List has been blocked by court action.

The DWR has a plan to bolster Bonneville cutthroat populations to help keep the trout off the endangered list, and Slater says the loss of the Parleys Creek fish will not affect the agency's efforts.

"This is a big stretch of stream and it is concerning that we have lost a conservation population, but this should not put a damper on the program," he said.

Slater and other DWR officials were collecting eggs and milt from Bonneville cutthroat at Mountain Dell Reservoir, the source of the creek in Parleys Canyon, on Tuesday morning when they heard about the fish kill.

"Maybe, if we deem it necessary, we can use some of the fish from that collection at Mountain Dell to repopulate that portion of Parleys Creek," he said.

Many Parleys Nature Park visitors were scared away by a handwritten sign posted at the entrance. It said the "water may be toxic" and warned people to "mind your dogs."

A few women who brought their dogs for a walk turned around when they saw it. At least one said she let her golden retrievers swim because a bunch of kids were already in the water.

Audrey and Steven Lewis of Salt Lake City took their West Highland terrier, Ozzy, for a walk in the park but did not let him swim despite the dog's objections. The two were shocked to see the dead fish everywhere.

"I won't come back until I hear it's OK on the news," said Steven. "I hope it's nothing serious, and we can get back here soon," his wife added.

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