

# Lack of ice hampers efforts to net homely invasive fish

February 6 2015, by Mead Gruver

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(AP)—Warm weather has helped grant a reprieve this year to a homely, eel-like and especially slimy fish pursued by anglers as they compete for big money in two annual ice-fishing tournaments at a reservoir on the Wyoming-Utah line.

The goal of both events is to remove invasive burbot from Flaming Gorge Reservoir. Among other things, burbot (pronounced BUR'-but) are known for being best caught during the winter, for wrapping their slippery bodies around fishermen's arms—and for being delicious. Some call them "poor man's lobster."

But wind and highs in the 50s have kept the reservoir mostly ice-free lately. Much of the remaining ice near shore is getting dicey to walk on.

"It's still about 6 inches thick, but we don't recommend going out on it now," said Les Tanner, owner of the Buckboard Marina and host of the Burbot Classic tournament.

Lack of ice cancelled the Jan. 23-25 Burbot Bash tournament. This weekend's Burbot Classic is still on, but has been opened to fishing by boat and from shore.

Both events were coordinated with the Wyoming and Utah state game and fish agencies.

In each tournament, anglers can win up to \$10,000 for catching one of

50 burbot previously netted and released with electronic tags. Other cash prizes reward the biggest and the most burbot caught.

The problem is that burbot—which are native in Wyoming east of the Continental Divide and parts north—somehow got introduced to the Green River drainage west of the divide in the 1990s.

In Flaming Gorge, the voracious and prolific predators are eating the eggs and spawn of kokanee salmon and other game species that make the reservoir a renowned angling destination.

In Canada, burbot can top 25 pounds and 3 feet long. They don't get quite so big in Flaming Gorge but pose a risk to endangered species such as the Colorado pikeminnow if they continue to spread down the Colorado River system.

A couple burbot have been caught in the Green River below the Flaming Gorge dam.

"That's an endangered species core habitat," said Joe Skorupski, a Wyoming Game and Fish Department fisheries biologist. "It's just another nonnative they don't need in that system. It's a definite, major threat."

Many fishermen out West would much rather flip dainty flies into the babbling lairs of trout than sit around in the cold and dark with a bloody hunk of bait on their line. But that's how you go for burbot: Ice fishing is best, hands-down.

Burbot can be found from a few feet to more than 70 feet deep and typically are most active around dusk. Cut-up sucker fish hooked on glow-in-the-dark jigs make good bait.

Once caught, the bigger ones are known to wrap their slender bodies around the arm of whoever's removing the hook. Yuck. What fish is worth that?

"They're definitely really good to eat. They're a white, fleshy meat," said Skorupski, adding they can be fried or even boiled up as "poor man's lobster."

Fishermen not only can keep as many burbot as they can catch from Flaming Gorge, they must. All burbot caught from the reservoir must be killed under state regulations.

Several hundred anglers have taken part in past Burbot Bash and Burbot Classic tournaments and participants in last year's events caught more than 6,000 burbot.

Biologists credit the Burbot Bash, started in 2009, and the Burbot Classic, begun last year, for having a big effect. Studies show burbot numbers in Flaming Gorge are down substantially in the past couple years.

"The fish are susceptible to angling," Skorupski said. "Without anglers, we would not be where we are today."

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