Poison at Truckee golf course nearly kills family pet

By Linda Fine Conaboy

Late fall was an unfortunate time for Bob, a Bernese Mountain dog. He didn't know that big danger prowled as he cavorted near the golf course close to his family's home at Schaffer's Mill in Truckee. Bob was less than a year old when he happened upon, and ingested, zinc phosphide, a poison so lethal that it requires multiple permits just to have it in possession.

It's generally used to kill rodents—that's what Schaffer's Mill Golf Course had in mind. Like many other golf courses, its use is just business as usual to get rid of varmints who burrow and plow the greens pursuing for food and making homes for themselves.

Bob is a well-loved member of the Daniel family. According to Bob's master, Mike Daniel, on this fateful day early in November, Bob picked up a scent and was off in search of something known only to him. Along the way, he found and ingested the poison, and the rest of the story has become an all too familiar saga in the war against burrowing pests. Bob became seriously ill, hovering near death for several days.

Two months after ingesting poison, Bob is still on the mend. Photo/Mike Daniel

When Daniel realized how sick Bob was, he started a **GoFundMe account** to help defray the nearly $12,000 it would take to nurse Bob back to health. As it turns out, to date, close to $3,500 has been donated for Bob's cause.

According to Daniel's GoFundMe page, Bob was treated by internal specialists, receiving plasma infusions and untold numbers of additional medications. At one point, as the family prepared for the worst, Bob started to improve, ever so slightly and miraculously was able to go home. He's now known as Bionic Bob by the veterinarians who treated him.

In mid-December, Daniel told Lake Tahoe News that Bob was doing well at home, although he continues to need additional lab work. "He drained my entire back account," Daniel reported. "The bills are still going up, not to mention the travel costs." He added that to his knowledge, at least one other dog was harmed, not to mention that many wild animals may also have ingested the poison.

"Our main goal is to stop Schaffer's Mill Golf Course from

using this pesticide. It’s apparent that other animals are eating it,” he said, in reference to pictures of tracks leading to and from the site of the scattered pesticide pellets on the ground.

“We live in a place that is extremely environmentally conscious and to be using this stuff that is potentially harming our wildlife is not good. The wildlife in the area don’t deserve this all in the name of gophers,” Daniel said.

At Lake Tahoe and Truckee, not much golf is played this time of year, but winter’s cold doesn’t keep pesky critters, like voles and gophers, from going about their daily lives. It’s just that when the ground is covered with snow, no one really knows what they’re up to.

Whether it’s your lawn, someone else’s lawn or a golf course, when the snow melts, the evidence presents itself—vole trails of freshly milled earth loop around the grass looking like a drunken waiter dribbling hot chocolate on his way to the kitchen—and then there’s the gopher holes, not to mention those fuzzy creatures called marmots scurrying around always on the prowl in search of their next ration of chow.

The internet is fraught with vendors offering traps, poison and bait to ward off these pests; judging from the plethora of ads, lawn owners need not suffer holey or roughed-up lawns; there are a multitude of ways to get rid of the culprits.

But in the case of Schaffer’s Mill, the poison of choice is highly lethal and not selective in who or what it may kill.

The poison used for rodents at the Truckee golf course. Photo/Mike Daniel

According to Joshua Huntsinger, Placer County agricultural commissioner, his office is responsible for the regulation and the use of poisons such as zinc phosphide, an inorganic compound that combines phosphorous with zinc and is used for rodent bait.

The National Pesticide Information Center states that when an animal eats the substance, the acid in the animal's stomach turns it into phosphine, a highly toxic gas. The phosphine then crosses into the body's cells and stops the cells from producing energy, causing them to die. It affects all cells, but targets specifically those in the heart, lungs and liver.

It's been used in the U.S. for rodent bait since 1947 and is made to ensure that it will attract pests such as gophers, ground squirrels and field mice.

Some of the signs of zinc phosphide poisoning include headache, dizziness, vomiting, difficulty breathing as well as potential liver and kidney failure, convulsions and delirium. It affects animals the same way it does humans.

Because it is a highly toxic substance California closely regulates it.

"Schaffer's Mill has a restricted materials permit,"

Huntsinger told Lake Tahoe News, adding that in addition to the permit, two other restrictions on users are in place: 1) the materials must be used by a certified pesticide applicator, or be supervised by a certified applicator, and 2) prior to application, the permit holder must file a notice of intent.

“It’s site specific and permits are evaluated for appropriateness,” said Huntsinger. “If it’s a spray, we would check the weather and maybe disallow it.”

In addition, the methodology on the label must be strictly followed, the application rate is carefully spelled out and should a carcass be discovered, it must be quickly disposed of to eliminate spread of the poison.

In general, Huntsinger said, standards of care—was it applied in a careful and specific manner under proper conditions to avoid contamination—are stringently enforced.

“This can’t be used if persons, animals or property may be damaged,” he said. “An applicator shall not make or continue application if there is a reasonable possibility of non-targeted animals [being harmed].”

Huntsinger said he’s aware of the complaint that was made and that his office is investigating whether a dog was actually harmed. “We need to satisfy all aspects,” he said.

“Did a violation really occur? Maybe the golf course did everything right. Maybe the dog’s owner was negligent. If there is a complaint about affected wildlife, we would investigate it. In this case, wildlife could have been involved.”

Fast forward to late December, at the investigation’s conclusion when Huntsinger contacted Lake Tahoe News to deliver the outcome of the investigation.

It was concluded, he said, that although Schaffer's Mill does have the necessary permit in hand and does have a certified person to apply the poison, they failed to file a notice of intent in a timely manner.

In addition, "It (zinc phosphide) was lying on the surface and it was ingested by one or two dogs. The question is, did Schaffer's Mill follow the rules and the label? Were there violations of the California law and regulations?"

Of the outcome of the investigation, Huntsinger said his office was unable to evaluate the pesticide for appropriateness or weather conditions. "In general, with restricted material, wind is not an issue. We're more worried about secondary poisoning. Is there a carnivore in danger?"

He added that the investigation concluded that the applicator complied with the label instructions at the rate of 1 teaspoon per burrow, placed inside the burrow and covered up.

"Rodents evidently pushed some of the bait on to the surface, but the golf course did monitor for dead rodents and bait on the surface. They did comply with the label's directions," Huntsinger said.

It was concluded that although dogs are prohibited on the golf course, Schaffer's Mill failed to enforce the prohibition. "The golf course knows dogs walk on the golf cart path. In this case, the dog was off leash, which is illegal in Placer County, and it strayed to an area where it shouldn't have been. Even though the golf course made an effort to do due diligence, it was the dog owner's negligence," Huntsinger said. "The bottom line in the case revealed one violation of the California Code of Regulations. But the larger issue is that the golf course appears not to be at fault. They did take specific steps to keep the bait out of the reach of dogs.

"We take it seriously when people don't comply. Our typical response is to issue administrative civil penalties when

violations of this nature are documented.”

As of today, no judgment has been issued; however, Huntsinger said his agency is required to take action.

“Although we haven’t issued anything yet, typically, this is a Class B violation carrying a fine of between $250 and $1,000. It may be many months before anything is actually resolved, even though action will be taken against Schaffer’s Mill,” Huntsinger said.

Repeated calls to Schaffer’s Mill have gone unheeded, although Lake Tahoe News spoke with Brent Haygarth, the organization’s general manager, who said he would prepare a statement for Lake Tahoe News addressing the situation.

No statement has been forthcoming.

There are several questions that come to mind regarding the future use of zinc phosphide—mainly, will Schaffer’s Mill continue to use the stuff? Do they feel a responsibility for the injured animals and do they worry about other wild creatures that may have also been harmed or killed?

According to Daniel, both Lahontan Golf Course and Martis Camp Golf Course have suspended use of the substance, but calls to course managers to verify this have not been returned.