

year, according to the research firm, DataQuick Information Systems.

But like everything else about the housing crisis, the fish aren't a perfect fix. They baffle some bankers and agents hired by lenders to look after the vacant homes, says Carlos Sanabria, the Contra Costa mosquito

control district's operations manager. "People think some trout-size thing is going to be swimming around in there clogging up the vents," he says. "I explain it's not something you are going to have for dinner."

Not everybody likes turning swimming pools into giant aquariums. "First you have fish, then you have birds that eat them" and then bird droppings, says Arnie Shal, a retired accountant, who lives next to several foreclosed houses with pools in Clearwater, Fla. "It's not really a healthy situation."

Mr. Shal, 71 years old, recently protested the use of mosquito fish in his posh development to the neighborhood association. He fears the fish will die in the Florida heat and allow mosquitoes to breed out of control. "This is trying to fix a serious health issue on the cheap," he says, "Everyone is under budgetary pressure, I understand. But they are going to leave us bug infested."

There are other concerns. A 1999 study showed that when biologists introduced mosquito fish to a pond containing tadpoles of the California red-legged frog, which is a threatened species, the fish harassed the tadpoles and harmed their growth. The frogs that emerged from the pond were 30% smaller than frogs raised in a pond without mosquito fish.

Stubby Tadpoles

"The *Gambusia* just keep taking bites out of the tadpoles, and the tadpoles end up kind of stubby," says the study's author, Sharon Lawler, a professor of entomology at University of California at Davis. She says well-intentioned buyers of foreclosed houses should be cautioned not to transfer the *Gambusia* from a pool into a pond containing the fragile tadpoles.

In addition to raising fish, Contra Costa scientists keep an indoor colony of mosquitoes for research. It falls to the district's entomologist, Steve Schutz, to provide the insects with their regular "blood meal," which he says the females need in order to reproduce. Every week or so, he sticks his arm into a screened cage containing more than a hundred mosquitoes in a hot and humid room called the "insectary."


He usually reads a book or works on a puzzle while the mosquitoes bite him for about 20 minutes. "I have been doing it so long that it doesn't even itch that much," he says. The district used to use a bobwhite quail for the blood meal, but Mr. Schutz says it's less hassle to offer up his arm.

'It's Organic'

It can take months after a defaulted homeowner leaves a house before the banks start caring for the property, Mr. Sanabria says. During that time, the fish can contain the mosquito problem, while a bank hires a caretaker to drain the pool or restart the filtration system. The

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