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Memo: IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The next meeting of the Alameda Creek Alliance is 7-9 p.m. Nov. 25 at the Centerville Public Library, 3801 Nicolet Ave., Fremont.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS GROUP MAKES A PUSH FOR FISH-FRIENDLY WATERS ALAMEDA CREEK ALLIANCE DRAWS UP STRATEGY

DENNIS ROCKSTROH column

A TRAIN rumbled by overhead as Jeff Miller made his way across large boulders along the southern bank of Alameda Creek to make his point.

"That's the main obstacle," he said, steadying himself and pointing to a concrete weir, a low-lying, dam-like structure running under the Union Pacific railroad tracks. The weir allows water to pass but prevents rushing creek water from undermining the bridge.

It also prevents salmon and steelhead from getting up the creek -- now kept in its banks by large earthen dikes -- to spawning grounds in Niles Canyon.

Miller is the latest in a long line of environmental political warriors trying to convince the multitude of agencies who have a say over Alameda Creek that now is the time to modify the barriers and make the waterway more fish-friendly.

Miller said Alameda Creek is the largest waterway in the East Bay. Its water drains from a 700-square-mile watershed from Mount Diablo to Mount Hamilton.

Steelhead trout historically ran up Alameda Creek until the 1950s, but upstream dam construction reduced the water flow. Then, in the 1960s, the Army Corps of Engineers built a 12-mile earthen flood-control project between Mission Boulevard and San Francisco Bay.

When there's enough water, fish move up the flood control channel trying to get up to the canyon, but they run into a dead end at the weir.

There are other obstacles, too, Miller said. There are the two inflatable dams on the creek and there are the public agencies: Alameda County Flood Control District, San Francisco Water Department, East Bay Regional Park District, Alameda County Water District, state Department of Fish and Game and state Department of Water Resources, to mention the major players.

"The political barriers have proven as deadly as the physical ones to the fish," Miller said.

Miller and his new group, the Alameda Creek Alliance, have yet to present the latest plan to the agencies. They are still holding meetings to draw up their strategy.

They know this has been tried before and it's failed before.

But Miller feels the time is right. Last year just before Thanksgiving, salmon tried to make their way up Alameda Creek only to find themselves trapped in pools near the weir.

The fish were so big that when the rescuers hauled them out of the pools and placed them in 50-gallon trash cans, their tails stuck out the top.

The rescued fish were hauled into Niles Canyon and released.

There were heavy rains last year, and more are expected this year. Last year, the unusually large plumes of fresh water pushing out into the bay from creeks in San Jose, Fremont and other Bay Area cities beckoned chinook, also known as Pacific king salmon.

But the dream of steelhead and salmon muscling their way unimpeded up Alameda Creek has been dashed before by the reality of the high cost and the complexity of the water supply.

For example, the Alameda County Water District has maintained that a fishery in the creek would disrupt district operations and the seepage of water into the aquifers, or ground storage zones, that supply local drinking water.

In order for the plan to work, the operators of upstream reservoirs would have to release water in drought years and summertime to keep the creek deep enough for the fish. But so far, of the agencies that supply water to Alameda Creek, none wants to release it from reservoirs except to replenish the groundwater supply.

Miller maintains that the public agencies are required by law to maintain natural habitats for the fish.

"We're definitely going to see this thing through," Miller said. "If it takes public pressure or legal action, we'll go that route, too."

Meanwhile, there are other fish in the creek.

Between April and September, the East Bay Regional Park District plants 20,000 to 30,000 rainbow trout to swim along with the other creek occupants, large- and small-mouthed bass, speckled dace, Sacramento squawfish, western sucker and Sacramento blackfish.

Miller feels that some day soon salmon and steelhead trout will join the mix.

"We feel it's going to happen," he said. "It's a question of when."

PHOTO: RON BURDA -- MERCURY NEWS

Jeff Miller, near a water control structure at Alameda Creek in Fremont, wants to make the waterway more fish-friendly.