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PRESSURE MOUNTS TO RESTORE FISH RUN

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Before the 1950s, thousands of juvenile steelhead trout splashed their way down Alameda Creek to the ocean to fatten up before swimming back upstream three years later to adult spawning grounds in Niles Canyon and the Sunol Regional Wilderness.

But over the years, water diversions to serve urban development and for flood control have reduced the creek to a trickle during the normal spring migration to the Bay.

Today, few steelhead make the run. And even fewer make it back in winter for upstream spawning because they're blocked by dams and other man-made barriers along the lower end of the creek in the Fremont area.

Nevertheless, political bait for restoring a year-round steelhead run may have been planted last month when an 11-year-old Fremont boy discovered a dying steelhead stranded in a drying puddle of water while trying to ascend the creek. Despite rescue attempts, it died.

Although there have been several reports of people spotting steelhead over the years, the Dec. 11 find was one of the first documented in the stream in at least 10 to 15 years, said fisheries biologist Pete Alexander, who lives in Sunol.

And it came just two weeks after a more than 20-pound king salmon, who was headed upstream, died after failing to climb a concrete weir near BART tracks that cross the creek. A year earlier, 25 king salmon were rescued from below the same concrete weir and moved up into Niles Canyon.

The finds are renewing the push to restore a year-round fish run along Alameda Creek. The creek takes drainage from a 700-square-mile watershed in Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

Members of the Alameda Creek Alliance want local agencies to build fish ladders to help fish get upstream and increase water flows in spring and summer to help fish migrate to the Bay.

"So many things have been done to this creek that have been disastrous for the fish, and still they are trying to return," said Jeff Miller of Fremont, an alliance organizer. "Now is the opportunity to do something right."

Miller said the 23-inch, 4 1/2-pound steelhead find in December was particularly significant because steelhead were recently listed by the federal government as a threatened species. That designation could lead to special protections for steelhead, including required changes in management of creeks where they are found.

Genetic tests are being performed on the dead steelhead to determine if it's the offspring of rainbow trout living in upper Alameda Creek near Sunol Regional Wilderness, which are descendants of the original steelhead run on the creek. Another possibility is that it strayed from a different creek, "but regardless of the origin, these fish have immeasurable value to us," Miller said.

Not everyone shares the alliance's dream of a restored steelhead run.

Local water agencies say the needed measures would come at a high cost and, unless new water sources are found, cause a shortage for residents in the Livermore-Amador Valley and the Fremont and San Francisco areas.

Part of the Zone 7 Water Agency's drinking water supply for the valley comes from the state at Lake Del Valle, which flows into a tributary of Alameda Creek.

"Everything we have available has been allocated either for agricultural or domestic use," said agency General Manager Dale Myers. "In the scheme of things, we don't have enough water to meet all our long-term requirements and are in the process of looking for additional resources to meet the expanded demand in the valley.

"We really don't have extra water available. Someone would have to pay to make up for that water."

Water agencies also contend more research is needed to prove steelhead could survive temperature and other changes that have occurred in the upstream habitat, even if they could make it that far.

"There needs to be good science behind any decision like this, and I don't think that's been done," said Paul Piraino, assistant general manager for the Alameda County Water District, which serves the Fremont area.

"Our board is open to further discussions, but we have had an honest concern over the technical feasibility. Obviously, we need to be protective of our customers and make sure that any reduction of water supply or economic loss is in some way mitigated," Piraino said.

A 1989 multi-agency study indicated a steelhead restoration project could cost from \$500 to \$12,000 per fish for water costs alone, plus up to \$1 million for fish ladders, fish screens and channel work.

Despite all the skepticism, Miller contended some operational changes can be made by water districts without significantly draining their water supplies.

"We're not saying to the water districts, 'Give us all your water' or 'Cut off your customers,'" Miller said. "There are definitely a lot of options or solutions.

"We're not focusing so much on the water supply now, and are trying to see if we can deal with physical access first," he said, pointing to the Fremont area's concrete weir and to a series of inflatable dams operated by the Alameda County Water District. "Now, there's enough water for fish to get (upstream) into Niles if the barriers are removed during high-flow conditions."

But he acknowledged that in the long run, water flows would have to be increased during spring and summer to have a healthy, self-sustaining steelhead run.

"There definitely would be money involved, but we are working to get interested East Bay residents involved in the creek," Miller said. "A lot can be done at zero cost to taxpayers: a lot of restoration work, data collection and monitoring."

He added that cleaner water and a better environment for fish would be more cost-efficient and healthy for humans in the long run.

The alliance is circulating a petition urging the state Department of Fish and Game and the National Marine Fisheries Service to take actions that would restore the fish run.

But Fish and Game official Bob Snyder said it may be too late to restore Alameda Creek for steelhead, due to changes in the habitat and in light of existing water diversion rights.

"Frankly, when you're talking fish vs. people, the fish are going to lose," Snyder said.

But that doesn't mean the chances for Alameda Creek have run out.

"We are not in a position to write any stream off," Snyder said. "We are in a position to work with this if it can be restored and if public sentiment changes."