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KIDS HELP PUT TROUT BACK IN CREEK

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Eleven-year-old Jamie Safrans peered into Alameda Creek on Thursday morning and watched a cluster of steelhead trout hatchlings hugging the shore. Timid and new to the wild, the tiny fish had lingered several minutes before joining friends in the flow.

"It's not going to be easy for them," lamented Safrans.

Not all will survive, but thanks in part to Evie Frantz's fifth-grade class at Donlon Elementary School in Pleasanton, they will have a chance.

One by one, 33 children released over 250 hatchlings Thursday along a fish-friendly stretch just north of Calaveras Reservoir in Sunol Regional Wilderness, two months after four nests of eggs were rescued from the creek below elevated BART tracks in Fremont.

The unusual class project, geared to foster environmental awareness, is also part of a local push to get steelhead running again in Alameda Creek.

Half a century ago, thousands of steelhead swam up the creek to lay eggs each year before washing back into the ocean with spring rains to fatten up. The numbers fell drastically with the building of dams and other barriers for urban development and flood control.

"People gave up on this stream a long time ago," said Jeff Miller, who founded the Alameda Creek Alliance last year after steelhead were listed as a federally threatened species. "These fish are trying hard to get upstream. They want to come home and spawn."

This year has brought the largest documented steelhead run in the creek in at least 40 years. Some feel the fish are announcing a comeback.

In March, roughly 20 adult steelhead were found trying desperately to migrate past a concrete support structure under BART tracks. Fish and Game officials, along with the alliance, captured 10 and moved them into more suitable spawning and rearing habitat.

A permanent solution would remove the barriers, said Miller, who is working with the Alameda County Flood Control District on erecting a fish ladder under the BART tracks. In addition, water flow must be maintained and ecology surveys conducted to see what the habitat will support.

A club called Bay Area Women Flyfishers, with help from fisheries specialist Pete Alexander of the East Bay Regional Parks District, rescued 273 eggs from under the tracks despite dire conditions elevated water temperatures, high silt levels and almost no cover from the elements.

The club has sponsored a grade school aquarium program for 10 years, mostly in places like Oakland and Richmond, where children might benefit from exposure to wildlife. Donlon teacher Frantz is the daughter of club member Pat Magnuson, and jumped at the chance to get her students involved.

"This is real-world teaching," said Frantz, who raised rainbow trout twice while teaching at Corvallis Elementary School in San Lorenzo. "They definitely care for the little guys. The idea is that they'll take better care of the environment as adults."

The class received the eggs and logged journal entries as they grew into hatchlings, which feed off yolk sacs attached to their stomachs.

When the sacs dwindle, the steelhead must head into the wild to hunt for themselves.

Ideally, they'll stay in the creek for a couple of years before splashing out to sea, then return in three to five years to spawn.

"It feels good to let them go back where they were raised," said 10-year-old Brian Leetch. "They weren't going to live where they were."