

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Upstream battle getting easier for steelhead activists

By Robert Dennis
Staff Writer

FREONT — In the more than two years that he has been fighting for the steelhead trout, Jeff Miller has often felt like he was swimming upstream. Lately, however, things have been looking up.

Miller is an activist with the Alameda Creek Alliance, a community group dedicated to preventing and restoring the ecosystems of the creek. Founded in August 1997, the group is concerned primarily with improving the habitat for threatened and endangered species native to the area.

While the creek once supported runs of steelhead trout, chinook and coho salmon, that changed due to a series of water supply and flood control projects and rapid urban development beginning in the late-1950s, Miller said.

Those changes blocked access to spawning habitats and lowered water quality, especially in the lower 12 miles or so, which runs through Fremont.

"It wasn't considered important back then, but things have changed dramatically," Miller said. "But we're trying to remedy the damage that was done in previous years, and there's been a lot of resistance from the water agencies. They look at it as a stumbling . . . It's been a long,

uphill battle to get them to look at it as habitat."

Although the Alameda County Flood Control District was helpful throughout, some other agencies were initially resistant to attempts to restore fish runs and preserve habitats, Miller said. Another organization, Friends of Alameda Creek, failed to make much headway in the late-1980s.

Some agencies argued that no steelhead remained in the creek, that they were not native, or that it was not feasible to restore the runs, Miller said. The first mission of the Alameda Creek Alliance, therefore, was to document the existence of steelhead and show they are indigenous to the area.

"We've proved they're not lost fish, we've proved they exist," Miller said.

The group has also tried to physically move fish past barriers created by dams and the 12-foot high, 30-foot deep, sloping concrete weirs below the BART and Union Pacific Railroad tracks where they cross the creek in Fremont.

They sought to achieve public

awareness and support, and pleaded their case to the various boards and agencies involved.

The group has about 100 active members, including both fishermen and environmentalists and 250 on its mailing list.

"Local fishermen have been working on this issue for 40 or more years," Miller said. "Some of these guys have been hand-carrying fish over these dams. It's a good alliance to have environmentalists and fly fishermen working together."

The work may have begun to pay off.

A lawsuit filed against the National Marine Fisheries Service by the alliance and seven other steelhead advocacy groups was settled in October. It will hopefully lead to new federal regulations preventing fish kills, habitat destruction and dewatering in steelhead streams, Miller said.

The alliance also hopes that new reports from the Alameda County Flood Control District and the San Francisco Public Utilities commission will also advance their cause.

The Alameda Creek Alliance meets once a month at the Math Science Nucleus, 4074 Empere Dr., Fremont. The next meeting is Tuesday, Jan. 18, at 7 p.m. For more information, call Jeff Miller at 845-4673.



Emmanuel Da Costa of the Alameda Clean Water Program works with the Alameda Creek Alliance by releasing a steelhead trout into the Alameda Creek in Niles Canyon.