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U.S. WILL STEP UP THE PACE ON PROTECTION OF STEELHEAD

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Under pressure from environmentalists, the federal government agreed Wednesday to speed up the time table for steelhead protections that could reduce human water supplies taken from the Delta and some rivers.

Any cuts on Delta water supplies are expected to be modest, but could be greater if limits are extremely tight on steelhead kills at state and federal water pumps in Tracy, industry managers said.

Delta pumping restrictions already in place to protect salmon should also protect young steelhead, officials said.

"In general we don't expect a big impact on Delta supplies, but the big unknown is the take limits," said Randy Brown, chief biologist for the state Department of Water Resources.

A coalition of environmental groups announced Wednesday it had reached a legal settlement with the National Marine Fisheries Service over the time table for adopting rules to protect the Central Valley steelhead.

The federal agency in March 1998 listed the Central Valley steelhead as threatened, but didn't follow up with rules for dam and pump operations to protect the fish.

Under the legal agreement, the agency will propose the rules by Dec. 15 and enact them by June 19.

"The steelhead had protections on the books, but it in real life was like open season on them. We had reports of steelhead being ground up in pumps and stranded in dried-out rivers," said Peter Galvin, biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups that sued the fish agency.

"This agreement is a big step in getting real protections for the steelhead."

Representatives of the National Marine Fisheries Service in Long Beach and Santa Rosa could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Environmentalists said the federal rules could help save the vanishing steelhead and boost efforts to restore them on rivers and creeks like Alameda Creek.

Environmentalists are pushing for fish ladders to be approved for lower Alameda Creek so steelhead can migrate to Pleasanton and Sunol to spawn.

"These protections could help the efforts of many creek groups trying to restore the steelhead," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance.