



RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Last March one of three steelhead found in Alameda Creek and implanted with radio transmitters swam up Niles Canyon, over a low dam, and about a mile up a very steep section of Stony Brook Creek, where she was blocked by a culvert. "We found Stella in a pool with five (non-migratory) rainbow trout," says Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance, whose members want to see steelhead thrive once again in this urban stream. "We've been checking the creek since then and have counted about 1,000 healthy fry. There's no reason steelhead couldn't reestablish themselves here." Healthy trout have also been found in Indian Joe and W-Tree Creeks, two more small tributaries. Genetic tests performed by Hopkins Marine Lab of fins from fish found in Alameda Creek in 1997-1998 indicated that the fish were wild steelhead native to the Central California Coast and most closely related to fish in Lagunitas Creek.

While some fish, like Stella, are able to make their way past the creek's many dams to spawn upstream, others become stranded. For the past several years, Alliance volunteers have hand carried stranded fish across the dams, with help from East Bay Regional Park District biologists. Another problem is getting juvenile fish to the Bay during outmigration season. If flows are insufficient, fish in the upper reaches become landlocked, says Miller, who would like to see the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) - whose dams are in the creek's upper reaches - do some smolt trapping to better understand the timing of juvenile migration. "That could help us get better flows in the lower creek at the right time. We could release strategic pulses of water to help them get to the Bay," says Miller.

In the meantime, the Alameda County Flood Control District is completing a feasibility study for a fish ladder at its BART weir, one of the stream's major obstacles. Assuming the study finds no insurmountable obstacles, Miller says the Alliance will submit a proposal to the Army Corps for restoring the flood control channel that currently encases the lower 11 miles of creek to a more natural stream, and look to the San Francisco PUC or the Alameda County Water District for sponsorship. "Even if the water district doesn't get involved in the project, they still need to provide for fish passage around their three inflatable dams," says Miller. The rubber dams divert the creek water into adjacent percolation lakes used to recharge groundwater and prevent salt water intrusion from the Bay.

In April, the Alliance, the Center for Biological Diversity and seven fishers' associations sued the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for failure to issue protective

regulations for steelhead. "If our lawsuit against the NMFS is successful, the first time steelhead are killed or prevented from migrating upstream by the inflatable dams, we will sue the water district for take of steelhead under the Endangered Species Act," vows Miller.

In response, the water district cites its participation in the feasibility study as well as its concerns about losing the function of its inflatable dams. SF PUC's Mike Carlin says the PUC's fish biologists are concerned that existing dams may be providing some type of habitat for other fish; he is also concerned that Niles Dam, built in the 1800s, may have historical significance. However, he says his agency has really just started to look into the issue. "What hasn't happened yet is for all users to get together and proceed in some sort of logical fashion on this."

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