

San Jose Mercury News (CA)

October 22, 1999

Section: Local

Edition: Morning Final

Page: 1B

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AGENCY MOVING TO HELP SAVE FISH STEELHEAD RULES DUE IN DECEMBER

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Settling a lawsuit by environmentalists who alleged foot-dragging, the federal government has accelerated its deadlines for imposing new rules to protect the steelhead trout, a silvery symbol of California's wild rivers that is struggling to avoid extinction.

The rules could place new limits on logging, cattle grazing, gravel mining, flood control projects, irrigation projects, road building and other activities across the Bay Area.

Any river or stream where the steelhead swims is affected, including the Guadalupe River in San Jose, the San Lorenzo River in Santa Cruz County, Gazos Creek on the San Mateo County coast and Alameda Creek near Fremont.

"It's been a purgatory for the fish," said Jeff Miller, a spokesman for the Alameda Creek Alliance, an environmental group in Fremont. "They are listed in name, but they don't get regulations to protect them. They have no real protections."

The steelhead, an oceangoing cousin of salmon and rainbow trout, was listed under the federal Endangered Species Act as "threatened" -- one step below "endangered" status -- by the National Marine Fisheries Service in August 1997. All streams and rivers from the Russian River in Sonoma County south to the Santa Maria River in San Luis Obispo County were affected.

A few months later, in March 1998, the agency widened the listing to the Central Valley as well as the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

But two years later, the fisheries service still has not issued regulations on how to protect the fish. Eight fishing and environmental groups sued in federal court in June, arguing the delay was unreasonable. The fisheries service had added steelhead to the list two years ago in response to another lawsuit by 20 environmental groups.

The lawsuit documents 34 incidents since 1997 in which steelhead have been killed by dam operations, barriers to spawning or habitat destruction, such as when San Mateo County crews ran a bulldozer into Gazos Creek during overzealous flood-control work.

On Tuesday, the fisheries service settled the latest case. It agreed to issue preliminary rules for steelhead protection by Dec. 15, then hold hearings and make the rules final by next June 19. What took so long?

The government was working on it but wanted to get all the details right, one attorney said. "We are trying to be very comprehensive," said Dawn McIntosh, an attorney with the National Marine Fisheries Service in Long Beach. "We're trying to find what needs to be prohibited and what doesn't, rather than just saying everything is prohibited."

An iridescent fish with pink and violet hues, the steelhead has been prized by anglers for more than a century for its strength and speed. Steelhead once thrived from San Diego to the Canadian border.

Today, however, the steelhead population in California has fallen by 75 percent -- from 487,000 to 124,000 -- since World War II, according to federal estimates, largely because logging, dam building and gravel mining have damaged the streams where the fish spawn. Adding to those pressures were the 1987-93 drought and a boom in the sea lion population, which have further diminished steelhead and harmed many salmon runs as well.

Commercial fishing of steelhead has been banned since the 1930s. Sport fishing is limited in most parts of California to hatchery-raised steelhead, which can be identified by a notch cut into their fins.

"We're chipping away to force the government to take corrective actions in these watersheds to bring back these fish," said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, in San Francisco.