

S.F.'s East Bay plans ignore fish, critics say

Trout in question protected by federal laws

By **Matt Carter**
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PLEASANTON

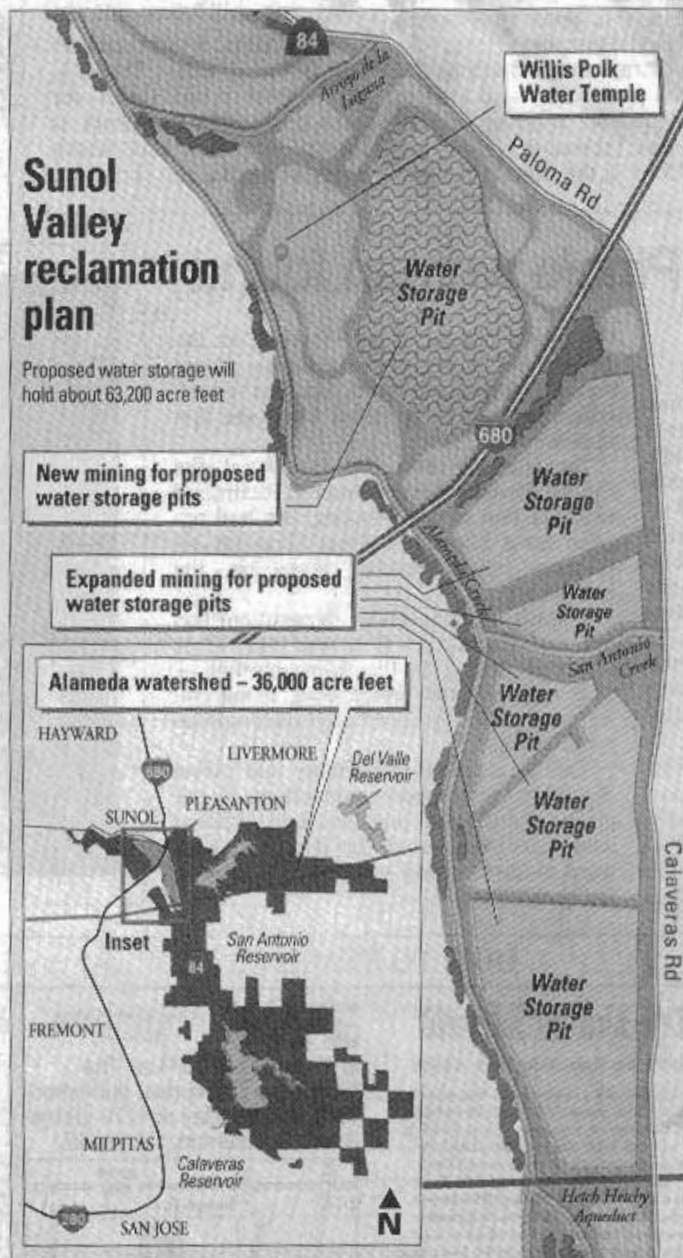
FIRST IT WAS DUST. Now it's fish. San Francisco's long-term plans for managing its huge landholdings in the East Bay won't pass muster with environmental regulators because they ignore steelhead trout with federal protections, activists say.

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission's 36,000 acres in the Alameda Creek watershed includes the land surrounding the San Antonio and Calaveras reservoirs. The watershed is part of a system of 11 reservoirs in the Bay Area and the Sierra Nevada mountains that San Francisco uses to supply drinking water to 2.4 million customers.

San Francisco PUC officials held public hearings in Pleasanton and San Francisco this week to accept comments on a report that outlines the environmental impacts of their 20-year plan for managing the Alameda Creek watershed.

In Pleasanton on Tuesday, Sunol residents continued to voice their opposition to one aspect of the plan — an expansion of gravel mining operations near the unincorporated town.

The San Francisco PUC proposes an expansion of existing rock quarries south of Interstate 680. Even more controversial is a plan — al-



Please see **Fish**, NEWS-17

STEELHEAD TROUBLE



ARIC CRABB — Staff

Members of the Alameda Creek Alliance work to catch a steelhead trout trapped in Alameda Creek. The steelhead trout has become an issue in a reclamation plan for Sunol Valley.

Fish: Mining near Sunol

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ready approved by Alameda County — to allow Mission Valley Rock Company to dig a new mining pit north of the freeway.

The new pit would take 140 acres of prime agricultural land out of production. And it would be dug within a quarter mile of an elementary school and the Willis Polk Water Temple, a historic monument built in 1910. San Francisco is restoring and building a park around the temple at a cost of \$4.8 million, in part to appease residents.

Sunol's only elected body, the Sunol Glen School Board, passed a resolution in 1997 denouncing the plan as a threat to children with asthma and other respiratory problems because of the dust it would produce.

But those charges didn't hold up in courts, where an activist group's challenges of the county's Environmental Impact Report for the project were rejected in 1997. The group, Save Our Sunol, has not given up its opposition. President Patricia

Stillman told San Francisco officials.

"We promise San Francisco a public relations nightmare if you proceed with this horrendous proposal," Stillman said.

San Francisco officials like the project because it gives them more revenue from mining companies and will boost their capacity to store water when mining is completed in 2035. Altogether, the six water storage pits the mining would create would store 63,200 acre feet of water — enough to supply a city the size of Pleasanton for nearly four years.

"We could use the storage right now," said Joe Naras, land resources manager for the water supply and treatment division of the San Francisco PUC. "Even with this storage, we'll still need more."

But first the San Francisco PUC's five commissioners must certify that the Environmental Impact Report for the Alameda Watershed Management Plan is complete. And that certification must be able to survive in court.

Because the report relies in part on the EIR prepared by the county, San Francisco officials are confident that further court challenges of plans to expand quarry operations north of I-680 on environmental grounds won't go far.

But the Alameda Watershed Management Plan is about more than just mining. From water releases to cattle grazing, the livelihood of the Central Coast steelhead is likely to be the next battleground.

"The main failure of this plan is it tries to ignore the steelhead issue," said the Alameda Creek Alliance's Jeff Miller.

San Francisco's EIR states there is a "low potential" that the Central Coast steelhead — an ocean-going rainbow trout listed as threatened in 1997 — can travel upstream to city-owned land.

Miller agrees that the steelhead's ability to reach historic spawning grounds is blocked by a flood-control dam where Bay Area Rapid Transit train tracks cross Alameda Creek in Fre-

generates cash for San Francisco

mont.

But a new report funded by Alameda County and the Coastal Conservancy is optimistic that, by helping the fish around the dam and other barriers, steelhead could be restored to the watershed.

The report also included a genetic study that concluded rainbow trout already living in tributaries of the Calaveras and San Antonio reservoirs "appear to be descended from native steelhead populations isolated behind dams or natural barriers."

Steelhead are born in freshwater streams, and scientists believe most travel to the ocean before returning to their place of birth to spawn. But recent studies suggest some stocks of steelhead and rainbow trout — which spend all of their lives in streams or lakes — may differ only in their behavior, not their genes.

The rainbow trout in the Alameda Creek watershed should be considered part of the stock of protected Central Coast steel-

head, the report concluded. Being well-adapted to local conditions, they are probably better suited to restoration efforts than non-native steelhead populations.

That means protecting the delicate stream beds they breed in from the damage caused by cattle San Francisco allows to graze on its lands, Miller said.

And according to Miller, the well being of steelhead downstream of the watershed also is affected by the way San Francisco controls the timing and amount of water released from its dams — an issue not addressed in the Alameda Watershed Management Plan.

"Obviously diverting the majority of the runoff into reservoirs affects fish populations," he said. "Those dams have cut off the best available habitat for steelhead and other migratory fish."

Naras said San Francisco already is working on ways to improve conditions for fish, including releasing more water for trout in Alameda Creek

below Calaveras Reservoir.

If state and federal environmental regulators want specific steps taken to protect steelhead, the final Environmental Impact Report will address those issues, he said.

"One goal we had was to enhance habitat (for steelhead and other protected species)," Naras said. "At the same time, our major goal is to protect water quality and water supply. We're at the proverbial balancing point where we're trying to balance a lot of issues and trying to make everyone happy."

Copies of the draft EIR for the Alameda Watershed Management Plan are available for review at the Fremont, Livermore, Milpitas and Pleasanton libraries. Written comments will be accepted until 5 p.m. Monday, Jan. 31. Address comments to Hillary E. Gitelman and mail to the San Francisco Planning Department, 1660 Mission St., San Francisco, CA 94103-2414. Or fax to (415) 558-6426.