

Panel Wants ^{Independent} To Give Fish What They Need Most — Water

by Ron McNicoll

Restoring steelhead and native rainbow trout to Alameda Creek and its tributaries may require buying water from the state water project or other sources. It may mean exploring other methods to bring up water levels.

Pete Alexander, a fisheries specialist with East Bay Regional Park District, said last week that it's necessary to get the level of Alameda Creek higher, as it was before development came to southern Alameda County. Without a high water level in the spring, native species that were using the creeks for decades, if not centuries, will continue to be shut out of their natural patterns of spawning, said Alexander.

When development came in the 1960s, the need for urban flood control and water management interrupted flows of water needed by the fish. Installation of small dams prevented their swimming upstream. But now some of the native steelhead and rainbow trout have been returning up Niles Creek, going as far as near

Sunol, said Alexander, who tracks them as part of his job.

Many people, sparked by the Alameda Creek Alliance, would like to see a restoration of water levels so the fish can migrate and spawn. There is even encouragement for a plan to remove a dam near Sunol, so the fish can swim farther upstream, said Jeff Miller of Alameda Creek Alliance.

An aide to Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt toured the area with San Francisco officials two weeks ago and expressed interest in helping earmark funds to remove the dam. San Francisco sees the dam as a nuisance that attracts partying youths who litter the area and swim there, said Miller. They are interested in getting rid of the dam, which has been used to help percolate more water into the underground basin.

THREE OPTIONS FOR HELPING THE FISH

How to address the big picture of restoring steelhead and rainbow trout to Alameda Creek and its tributaries is still being discussed by a fisheries subcommittee of the Alameda County

(See FISH, page 8)

RO PROJECTS

(continued from page one)

Watershed Management Committee (ACWMC).

The committee is an umbrella group of agencies, conservationists, governments and developers that has been meeting for two years to study ways to help streams that run into Alameda Creek. Miller and Alexander are members of the fisheries subcommittee.

Miller told the Independent Tuesday that there are three ways of getting more water for the streams. The least desirable approach is to purchase water from the Sierra or Central Valley to increase the stream flow, said Miller.

Adding the water would help the fish get to spawning grounds and back, but it would be ecologically damaging in the Sierra and Central Valley, said Miller. Too many streams there have already been ruined by dams and water diversion.

A little better alternative, said

Miller, would be to raise the reservoirs, including Calaveras (south of Sonol) and Lake Del Valle, and release the water at necessary periods, usually in spring and summer. The valley's gravel quarries, due for abandonment by 2030, could be a part of that scheme, said Miller.

But that approach has a drawback, too, said Miller. "If the water is there, it would be reserved for development. There is zero water flow in Alameda Creek now reserved for fish," he said.

The third alternative is the best, Miller believes. That would be to renegotiate all of the water rights to Alameda Creek. That way, a percentage could be secured for migrating fish. It's the least likely alternative to be adopted because of the stakes that San Francisco, Alameda County Water District and Zone 7 Water Agency have in the watershed area, said Miller.

All three options will be outlined in a draft report from the fisheries subcommittee due out Jan. 18. The fisheries group will meet Jan. 24 to review it and it will be released after that.

The report's timing bumps up against the deadline San Francisco has set for comments on its EIR on the whole 40,000-acre watershed. Comments are due by Jan. 31. San Francisco has been putting together a watershed management plan that looks at such uses as cattle grazing.

San Francisco is sponsoring a public hearing on that document at 5:30 p.m., Jan. 25 at Pleasanton Middle School, 5001 Case Ave., Pleasanton.

Miller said he hasn't read San Francisco's EIR draft yet. Since his group has strong ideas about what ought to be done in the watershed, he has written San Francisco to ask for an extension of the comment period.

11/13/00