

Obsolete dams to be torn down or modified with fish ladders

■ DAMS

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least a year because of the necessity to complete planning, find funding and begin the environmental review process.

Solutions could include building a fish ladder on the dams — so migrating fish could get upstream — to razing the dams. Fish ladders create ascending small puddles, allowing fish to jump from one level to the next.

With a price tag of up to \$1.5 million, the project's funding could come from sources such as the CalFed Bay-Delta program, a consortium of state and federal agencies. CalFed was formed, in part, to restore the state's endangered species while devising a long-term plan for California's drinking water.

This month, voters also passed Proposition 13, which contains \$250 million for fish screens, mine cleanup and other environmental projects in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The steelhead, an ocean-going 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.

At one time, a significant number of steelhead inhabited Alameda Creek before construction and other developments began on the watershed.

Agencies involved in steelhead restoration applauded the PUC's decision.

"This helps our overall effort toward fisheries restoration in Alameda Creek. . . It's a real show of support," said Laura Kilgour, an engineer-scientist for the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District. The district has been actively involved in the movement to restore steelhead trout in Alameda Creek.

Steelhead trout migrate to the ocean as juveniles and then return to freshwater creeks and rivers to spawn at maturity.

A study recently released by Kilgour's agency found that suitable habitat exists within the Alameda Creek watershed — the largest drainage in the south San Francisco Bay region — to support spawning and rearing of steelhead.

Despite the planned removal or modification of the Sunol and Niles dams, there are still other obstacles. These include three inflatable rubber dams and an 11-foot-high concrete drop.

Kilgour said her agency, which has jurisdiction over the concrete drop, plans to build a fish ladder in the next few years.

Paul Piraino of the Alameda County Water District, which owns the rubber dams, said his agency has no plans to remove them, but is considering building a fish ladder or remodeling these dams in a way that will accommodate the passage of fish.

Unlike the Sunol and Niles dams, Piraino said, the rubber dams are an important water supply for Fremont, Union City and Newark, and are used to divert local and state water supplies to replenish the groundwater basin.

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