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EVENT SEEKS TO HELP RESTORE TROUT RUN STEELHEAD FESTIVAL PUBLICIZES EFFORTS ALONG ALAMEDA CREEK

DENNIS AKIZUKI, Mercury News

Something fishy was going on Saturday in Fremont.

A family from San Ramon wore homemade fish hats, the Mission Peak Fly Anglers demonstrated how to tie a fly and dozens participated in a race that organizers named "the fish run."

Several hundred people gathered at Niles Community Park for the first Fremont Steelhead Festival and Watershed Awareness Fair, an event to publicize efforts to restore the steelhead run in Alameda Creek and celebrate the progress already made to achieve that goal.

"It's within reach, we're getting there," said Jeff Miller, a watershed activist who is a member of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "I have faith it will happen in my lifetime."

At one time, steelhead swam freely up and down Alameda Creek, and spawned in a number of places along the waterway and its tributaries that flow throughout southern Alameda County and northern Santa Clara County. But since the 1950s, dams and other flood-control structures have made it almost impossible for the fish to reach their historic spawning grounds.

"Back in the '50s, there used to be big runs of steelhead trout all the way to Isabel Avenue near Livermore," said Fremont resident Harry Reis, who has fished the creek for 48 years.

For decades, environmentalists and fishermen have dreamed of removing the obstructions and adding fish ladders that would enable steelhead trout and salmon to swim freely upstream once again. The dream started to become a reality three years ago when the Alameda Creek Alliance began to lobby the agencies that control the dams and flood-control structures.

Now, four agencies -- the Alameda County Water District, the Alameda County Flood Control District, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and the East Bay Regional Park District -- have agreed to remove the barriers or build fish ladders.

Miller said by 2003, fish may be able to swim all the way to Sunol. The alliance plans to artificially spawn trout and reseed the upper sections of watershed. Supporters hope some stray salmon from the Pacific Ocean also will make their way up the stream to spawn.

That has fly fisherman Albert Yi itching to cast into the creek.

"It'll be a bonus for me in my 30s and 40s not to have to drive a couple of hours to get to prime steelhead and salmon grounds," said Yi, a 23-year-old Cupertino resident and University of California-Berkeley student.

Saturday's festival began with about 130 runners in five- and 10-kilometer races that took participants on a jaunt around Alameda Creek. About a dozen informational tables were set up in the park, representing agencies and groups such as the Sierra Club, Tri-City Ecology Center, the city of Fremont and the water district.

Sorry, there wasn't any fresh salmon to munch on, just barbecue ribs and free yogurt.

Margie Graves-Dowd, 3, of San Ramon, came with her parents, decked out in fish hats.

"We decided to come as a family of fish," said her mother, Elisa Dowd. "We want the fish to come back to the creeks."

The South San Ramon Creek, a tributary of Alameda Creek, flows in back of their house.

Asked what kind of fish were on her hat, Margie shyly replied: "Baby fish."