

AROUND THE AREA

Steelhead trout plan faces new challenge

Others have hooks in expected funding

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FREMONT — Re-introducing steelhead trout in Alameda Creek might cost county water users more than anticipated.

The restoration will cost almost double what the district hopes to get from the Army Corps of Engineers, said a study by the Alameda County Water and Alameda Flood Control districts. Getting the maximum amount from the Corps could be easier said than done.

The study, which cost \$35,000, estimates the bill for the improvements will be nearly \$10 million. The Corps may offer \$5 million at most.

Last winter, biologists deemed Alameda Creek a feasible habitat for steelhead trout, a fish spotted rarely in the creek since the 1950s.

In 1975, the steelheads' stream-to-ocean life cycle was disrupted by a concrete structure — or weir — built by the Corps to prevent erosion around a BART rail crossing near Niles.

In addition to preventing erosion, the weir, nicknamed "dragon's teeth" because of its black-piano-key-like appearance

above water, also prevents steelhead from swimming upstream from the Bay to spawn in the Niles Canyon near Sunol and the tributaries beyond. cm sub-head: Environmental restoration program

The Corps, because it built the barrier, might offer money and labor to help fix the problem. But that money sits in a pot allocated nationwide.

Historically, the Corps has embarked on hundreds of projects that later proved to be environmentally unsound, such as the BART weir, which was built for Alameda County Flood Control.

\$25 million annual fund

To rectify some of the problems it helped create, the Corps 14 years ago began footing the bill and providing the labor for environmental improvements around the nation. But there's only \$25 million in the annual pot, and the Corps usually spends considerably less than that, said Corps environmental planner Bill De Jager.

Though he has no hard numbers, De Jager said the district is competing against "scores" of projects in the region alone.

Alameda County Water District's proposal also constitutes the largest request in the region this year, De Jager said.

To receive the \$5 million improvements, the water district must fork over \$1.7 million in matching funds.

But that's just a little more than half the battle.

Even if the district receives this help, it still will need much more, said Eric Cartwright, a water resource specialist at the water district.

"We were hit with sticker shock (when the cost-analysis was finished)," he said. "There's definitely a gap between what the Corps can provide and what the actual costs are."

At \$6.7 million, the Corps' fall more than \$3 million short of the estimate, which water district officials admit is high-end.

The district might seek additional funds from agencies like CALFED and the state Fish and Game.

Proposed projects would include building up to three fish ladders to raise fish over the BART weir and nearby Alameda County Water District rubber dams at a cost of \$5.8 million.

In addition, sophisticated screens would be placed on pipes that divert water from Alameda Creek to the nearby Quarry Lakes to keep baby steelhead from being sucked into the lakes. That would cost about \$4.2 million.

Both projects could be completed by 2003.

The steelhead the projects would benefit were listed as "threatened" in Northern California in 1997. That year, a local environmental group, the Alameda Creek Alliance, began monitoring the number of steelhead attempting to migrate from the Bay to freshwater habitat to spawn in streams stemming from Alameda Creek near Sunol.

100 sightings

Last year, the alliance found just one steelhead trying to get past the BART weir. But since the listing, the alliance has documented about 100 sightings in the creek, 15 of which were moved by hand over the weir, spokesman Jeff Miller said.

Restoring the creek for steelhead also would mean the end of fishing for hatchery rainbow trout in Niles Canyon, Miller said. Such fishing will move to the quarry lakes, which will eventually be open for recreational use, he said.

"We have to leave the stream for the wild fish," he said, adding that fly fisherman from the Alameda Creek Alliance soon will be educating other fishermen in the canyon about the need to restore the steelhead runs.