

Contra Costa Times (Walnut Creek, CA)

August 18, 2001

Section: news

Edition: Final

Page: a07

CONCRETE STEPS MADE TO AID FISH

BONITA BREWER, TIMES STAFF WRITER

Sledgehammers swung heartily during a festive "dam-busting" ceremony Friday as the first of a series of obstacles to restoring steelhead trout runs along Alameda Creek began to come down. Two small dams within the Sunol Regional Wilderness will be demolished, both to eliminate public safety hazards and to create a more suitable habitat for trout and other creek life, East Bay Regional Park District officials said.

"We get to do something good for the environment," California Resources Secretary Mary Nichols told a crowd of about 100 assembled at the park Friday. "Years and years of effort have gone into bringing us to this day."

Nichols said the dam removals within the park, along with larger ones planned further downstream toward the Bay, offer a chance to rectify the harm to steelhead resulting from urbanization.

"I believe every watershed in the state deserves the kind of citizen support Alameda Creek has," she said, but added that the process will take the pooling of a lot of resources. "It costs a lot of money to undo some of these barriers to fish" migrations.

The dam removal will be completed next week with more suitable equipment. But Friday's ceremonial event was attended by representatives of local, state and federal agencies, along with citizens groups that have worked for many years to restore a steelhead run along Alameda Creek.

"I'm feeling really good," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "With a little luck, we'll have all our fish passage problems out of the way by the end of 2003. It's pretty exciting, and this (removal of dams within the park) is the first step the first concrete removal, if you can excuse the pun. It feels like things are actually moving along."

Two other bigger dams, in Niles Canyon below the town of Sunol, are nonfunctioning and will be removed by the San Francisco Water Department in 2002 or 2003 to help steelhead migrate upstream. The water agency is still conducting environmental studies and working to come up with the needed \$1.8 million.

Other barriers to fish migration still must be removed for steelhead to make it from the ocean and into Niles Canyon in the first place.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is conducting preliminary studies of building fish ladders to help steelhead migrate upstream over three rubber dams and a concrete weir at the lower end of the creek in the Fremont area.

The Corps of Engineers is being asked to provide 75 percent of the \$6.7 million needed for the ladders and for fish screens at Alameda County Water District diversion points. Local agencies would need to pay a 25 percent share.

The one remaining obstacle would involve building ladders over a Pacific Gas & Electric Co. natural gas crossing in Sunol Valley.

The two dams being removed within the Sunol Regional Wilderness were built by the park district in the 1970s to create swimming holes for public use.

One of the dams has become so silted that it no longer functions as a dam, and the other has raised some public safety concerns. In April 1999, a 7-year-old Livermore boy nearly drowned after becoming trapped in some churning water behind the low-lying dam.

Meanwhile, area water agencies, including in the Livermore-Amador Valley, have warned that municipal water supplies could be affected if they're required to release water from dams, or to change other operations, in order to maintain year-round flows for fish.