

Die cast for return of steelhead

By Matt Carter
STAFF WRITER

SUNOL — After years of study, proponents of a plan to restore steelhead trout to Alameda Creek will take a symbolic step Friday when work begins to demolish two small dams in the Sunol Regional Wilderness.

The demolition project, which is being conducted by the East Bay Regional Park District, is just one of several steps planned to bring the ocean-going route back to Alameda Creek and its tributaries.

Barriers to migration

Other work to get fish around barriers to migration, including the removal of two larger, 100-year-old dams in Niles Canyon, isn't expected to be completed until 2003 at the earliest.

But to have even a small part of the steelhead restoration plan finally underway is seen as cause for celebration. California's Secretary for Resources, Mary D. Nichols, and representatives of some of the 18 local, state and federal agencies who have been making plans to bring the steelhead back are expected to be on hand for an 11 a.m. dam-busting ceremony.

"This is a beginning," said the Alameda Creek Alliance's Jeff Miller. "Next summer, if the environmental review can be done in time, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission has already budgeted \$1 million for the removal of the dams in Niles Canyon."

The Alameda Creek Alliance has been participating in meetings of a work group created in 1999 to study the potential for restoring native steelhead and salmon to the creek.

The Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup released a report in January 2000, which concluded it's likely small populations of rainbow trout trapped behind the barriers are descendants of the migratory steelhead that once traveled to and from the sea.

Fish ladders

The work group identified 18 barriers to fish migration in the Creek and drew up preliminary plans for removing or building fish ladders around the biggest ones.

The first, and most formidable, barriers to steelhead attempting to return to spawning grounds from the ocean are found near Fremont. There, the plan is to use a fish ladder to get steelhead past a concrete weir that protects a bridge carrying BART trains over Alameda Creek.

Fish ladders would also be employed to get fish around

three inflatable dams the Alameda County Water District uses to divert water from the creek to the Quarry Lakes. The water percolates down to aquifers that supply 30 percent to 50 percent of the district's more than 300,000 customers in Fremont, Newark and Union City.

Agencies participating in the work group have applied to the Army Corps of Engineers for a \$5 million grant to help pay for the work, and the Corps is studying the idea closely.

One reason the work group's plans are being taken seriously is that the very water agencies that depend on Alameda Creek for much of their needs are taking a leading role in crafting them.

Alameda Water District

As the likelihood that barriers to steelhead will be removed grows, those water agencies — the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and the Alameda County Water District — will soon have to determine how much water must be released from upstream reservoirs to allow fish migration.

But Miller and officials with the water agencies don't think they're headed for a battle over water like the one between farmers and salmon in the Klamath River Basin.

The solution may be as simple as changing the timing of releases to help smolts — young salmon — travel downstream to the ocean in the spring. Releases aren't as crucial when adults migrate upstream to spawn during rainy winter months, and may be.

"I can't say I think it's going

to be an easy fix — it will take quite a bit of technical work and thinking out of the box to deal with some of the potential balancing conflicts we'll be confronting," said Paul Piraino, general manager of the Alameda County Water District. "Our hope... is to develop a win-win solution for everyone."