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Fish ladder project may cost millions

Restoring steelhead trout

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OAKLAND -- Removing some of the barriers that prevent ocean-going steelhead trout from reaching historic spawning grounds in Alameda Creek could cost more than \$10 million and require congressional approval. A task force that includes local water agencies and environmentalists is working with the Army Corps of Engineers on a plan to get fish around man-made barriers such as dams.

The first phase of the plan involves building two fish ladders near Fremont. The ladders would allow fish to swim past inflatable dams that are used to divert water from the creek, and a concrete barrier that protects a BART train track crossing.

If the cost of building fish ladders and other improvements is \$6.7 million or less, the Corps of Engineers has the authority to sign off on the project and provide up to \$5 million in federal funding without congressional approval. The money is available through a habitat restoration that requires local agencies to pay 25 percent of a project's cost.

With federal money in hand, work on the two fish ladders envisioned as the first phase of the plan could be completed as soon as 2005, clearing the way for further work upstream, members of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors were told Monday.

But the Corps of Engineers estimates that the job will cost at least \$8 million, and could even exceed \$10 million.

Getting the federal government to foot the larger bill would require a more complex investigation and congressional approval -- a process that can take 10 years or more, an Alameda County official told Supervisors Nate Miley and Scott Haggerty at a Transportation and Planning Committee meeting.

"We could include a lot more projects for restoration of the lower watershed" by going through that process, said Carla Schulteis of the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District. "There are quite a few stakeholders who are very concerned about taking that long." An alternative would be to limit the scale of the project to keep the cost within the scope of the Corps of Engineers' habitat restoration program.

"I'm pretty confident that (a scaled-down) project will go forward," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance, an environmental group that has participated in the steelhead restoration task force since it was formed in 1999. "If some facilities are not included, we'll have to look for funding elsewhere."

Miller said that in addition to building fish ladders, screens will need to be installed at as many as 20 diversion points where water is drawn from Alameda Creek. A scaled-back project might involve building the two fish ladders and installing fish screens at a few major diversion points. The more extensive investigation process, while it has the potential to yield more federal funding, "could take 15 years," Miller said. "We'd have a big problem with that. We wouldn't wait that long -

- we'd go to court and try to get enforcement of existing Endangered Species Act and (California) Fish and Game requirements for migratory fish passage."

Before man-made barriers such as dams were erected in the creek, Central Coast steelhead trout born in Alameda Creek migrated to the Pacific Ocean and returned to the creek to spawn. The fish are listed as a threatened species, and the streams where they historically bred have been designated as "critical habitat" for their recovery.

Studies show small populations of landlocked rainbow trout upstream of the dams are probably descended from migratory steelhead, and could be used as breeding stock for restoring the steelhead run if barriers were removed.

A Corps of Engineers report notes that while other creeks and streams feeding into San Francisco Bay once supported steelhead runs, Alameda Creek "has the best potential for restoration of steelhead trout of any large watershed in the East Bay."

The first barriers to fish headed upstream from San Francisco Bay are three inflatable dams operated by the Alameda County Water District, which provides water to about 320,000 people in Fremont, Newark and Union City. Up to half of the district's water can come from diversions from Alameda Creek.

Alameda County and the Alameda County Water District are the lead agencies in the task force, and would provide the matching dollars required by the Corps of Engineers' habitat restoration program.

The other major barrier being addressed in the first phase of the project is a dam-like concrete structure built to protect BART tracks crossing Alameda Creek. The so-called "BART weir" was part of an Army Corps of Engineers flood control project, completed in 1975, that turned the stretch of Alameda Creek between Mission Boulevard and San Francisco Bay into a concrete-lined flood control channel.

Upstream from those barriers, the task force has identified more than a dozen other obstacles to steelhead trout in Alameda Creek and tributaries in Sunol, Pleasanton and Livermore.

The East Bay Regional Park District has removed two small swim dams in the Sunol Regional Wilderness, and the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission is seeking money to remove two dams in Niles Canyon. The San Francisco PUC's applications for state and federal money have been turned down -- largely, staff members believe, because of the uncertainty surrounding the construction of the fish ladders.

The Army Corps of Engineers could issue a decision on whether the project qualifies for its habitat restoration program as soon as next month.

"We're hopeful that it will get approved and we'll move forward with a project," said the Alameda County Water District's Eric Cartwright. "If for any reason it doesn't, we'd look at alternative funding (from other state and federal agencies). We see this as a project that provides benefits to the entire region."

Miller said that if the fish ladders are built soon, his group's difficulties getting permits to transport wild steelhead upstream won't seem quite as tragic. When the fish gained status as protected species, volunteers had to give up an annual ritual of assisting a handful of steelhead that attempt to swim up the creek each year.

Miller said that because of a backlog of permit applications, it's unlikely that the volunteers will get permits to transport steelhead up Alameda Creek this winter.

"I'll tell you, a lot of members of our group, their attitude is, 'Let's go out and move those fish,'" Miller said. "I would say next winter we're going to move fish, permit or not."

But Miller said the volunteer effort is largely symbolic. If construction of fish ladders is delayed, he said the Alameda Creek Alliance will lobby the Department of Fish and Game to coordinate a "trap and haul" fish transport program.