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Section: Headline News

'Chain of Lakes' may become reality

Water diversion dam won't harm steelhead reintroduction program, officials say

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PLEASANTON -- A plan to divert water to converted quarry pits in order to recharge underground drinking water supplies is moving forward with assurances that it won't set back efforts to reintroduce steelhead trout. Environmental activists and regulators had questions about a plan by the Zone 7 water agency to install an inflatable dam on a stretch of the Arroyo Mocho between Pleasanton and Livermore.

Although there are no endangered species in the heavily mined area, a coalition of activists and government agencies have developed a plan to reintroduce threatened steelhead trout to Alameda Creek and its tributaries, including the Arroyo Mocho.

The Zone 7 water agency, which is participating in the steelhead restoration plan, argued that the three-foot tall dam would not be used during months when the ocean-going trout would be making migratory spawning runs.

After hearing from groups like the Alameda Creek Alliance and the state Department of Fish and Game, Zone 7 officials agreed to equip the intake of the dam with a fish screen.

On Wednesday, the Zone 7 board of directors approved a formal declaration that the dam's potential impacts could be addressed and would have no significant impacts.

Zone 7, which delivers water to retailers that supply residents of Livermore, Pleasanton and Dublin, wants to have the dam in place by next summer to divert water to two converted quarry pits.

The quarry pits, part of the proposed "Chain of Lakes" water storage project north of Stanley Boulevard, will allow Zone 7 to step up its groundwater recharge program.

Zone 7 gets most of its water from the State Water Project, but also relies on groundwater supplies. The agency's goal is to draw no more than 25 percent of its water from groundwater wells, but that percentage is projected to increase to 42 percent by 2012. The following year, a water treatment plant capable of handling larger volumes from the state water project will reduce demands on groundwater.

In winter months, when demand is low, the aqueduct that delivers state water to Zone 7 and two other agencies is capable of delivering more water than the agency needs. In the summer, demand is greater than the aqueduct's capacity.

An \$85 million expansion of the South Bay Aqueduct is under way, with Zone 7's share of the work estimated at \$70 million.

To take delivery of all the state water it's entitled to -- and keep groundwater supplies from becoming depleted -- Zone 7 releases water from the state water project into the Arroyo Mocho and the Arroyo del Valle.

The water percolates down into the aquifer. To better use the aquifer for storage of state water, Zone 7 plans to divert water from the Arroyo Mocho into the Chain of Lakes.

"We used to recharge all summer long, but now we have to do it in the spring and fall, because we have no capacity (in the aqueduct) in summer," said Zone 7 project manager Matt Katen. "We have to increase the recharge rate. If we put enough (water) into the lake, it will charge all summer long."

Katen said the goal is to have the inflatable dam in place by the end of next summer, in time to be used for recharge in the fall.

Now that Zone 7 has certified a Mitigated Negative Declaration stating that the dam's impacts won't be significant, it needs permits from the Department of Fish and Game, the Regional Water Quality Control Board and the Army Corps of Engineers.