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Alameda Creek dams to be demolished

Plans for restoration of steelhead move forward

By Matt Carter, STAFF WRITER

Plans to restore runs of ocean-roaming steelhead trout to Alameda Creek could get a boost with the removal of two dams in Alameda Creek between Fremont and Pleasanton. But before the century-old dams can be removed, California's strict environmental laws require a study to make sure there are no unintended environmental consequences.

The study will get under way Wednesday in Fremont, with a "scoping" meeting to determine what issues need to be looked at in an Environmental Impact Report. Potential issues include what to do with sediment, gravel and rock that have built up behind the dam over the years. The sediment buildup may not have to be removed from the creek. Instead, it could be used to fill the "plunge pool" -- a depression in the creekbed formed by water flowing over the top of the dam -- and to form spawning beds downstream.

San Francisco, which acquired the Sunol and Niles Canyon dams as part of the city and county's vast drinking water supply system, is managing the \$6.9 million dam removal project. It was once hoped the dams would be removed as early as 2003. Now, it remains to be seen whether the latest goal of beginning demolition next year can still be met.

"Our estimate was that we would begin demolition in 2005, but the environmental process can take some time," said Barbara Palacios, the project manager for the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission. "It's estimated the (Environmental Impact Report) will take ... through 2005." Because work on the dams must be done in the dry summer months, demolition may have to be postponed until 2006.

But taking out the dams is just one component of a larger effort to remove barriers to fish migration in Alameda Creek. A task force of local water districts, government agencies and environmental groups began the process in 1999.

The first barriers to fish are three inflatable dams operated by the Alameda County Water District, which gets up to half the water it supplies to Fremont, Newark and Union City from Alameda Creek. Another major barrier is a "weir," or dam-like concrete structure in Fremont, which protects BART tracks that cross Alameda Creek.

Money has yet to be set aside to carry out plans to construct two fish ladders around those obstacles. The Army Corps of Engineers, which two years estimated the job would cost \$10 million or more, still hasn't earmarked money for the job.

"We're going to go to Congress this fall for an appropriation for the creek restoration process next year," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "The Corps (of Engineers) just lost all their funding, and the process was glacially slow, anyway." Miller said the Alameda Creek Alliance is an enthusiastic supporter of San Francisco's plan to remove Sunol and Niles Canyon dams. "We'll be happy to see them go," Miller said. "The only issues are technical ones."

A public scoping meeting on the Environmental Impact Report being prepared for the removal of Sunol and Niles Canyon dams will take place from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, July 28, in the Fremont Main Library, Fukaya Public Meeting Room, 2400 Stevenson Blvd., Fremont. Comments on the scope of the EIR will be accepted until Aug. 9. For more information, call (415) 554-3289.