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Alameda Creek Steelhead May Be on Protected List

A federal fisheries agency has proposed that rainbow trout and landlocked reservoir populations of steelhead trout in Alameda Creek be protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries proposed on June 14 resident trout in Alameda Creek be included as part of the Central California Coast steelhead trout population, which was listed as a threatened species under the ESA in August 1997. Landlocked populations of steelhead/rainbow trout above Calaveras and San Antonio Dams, owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC), are the only resident trout above major dams currently proposed for ESA listing in California.

“NOAA Fisheries has determined that resident trout in Alameda Creek are essential to the recovery of steelhead not just in our watershed, but the entire Central California Coast,” said Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. “All life forms of steelhead trout should be protected, especially from the Bay Area south, where many streams such as Alameda Creek have only remnant populations of ocean-run fish,” added Miller.

The NOAA proposal for increased protection resulted from a status review of 26 salmon and steelhead species listed under the ESA in California, Oregon, and Washington. The review was prompted by lawsuits from agricultural interests and water districts intended to strip federal protection from listed salmon species. The NOAA proposal would uphold ESA protection for 25 of the 26 listed salmon stocks and grant ESA protection to some but not all hatchery-raised salmon in west coast populations. All resident trout below major dams that can interbreed with migratory steelhead would also be included in ten ESA-listed west coast steelhead populations.

Alameda Creek trout were singled out for additional protection partly due to studies published by the U.S. Geological Survey in 1999 and 2003 demonstrating that native Alameda Creek rainbow trout are genetically related to wild steelhead in the Central California Coast population.

Landlocked trout behind the two SFPUC reservoirs are thought to be the descendants of the original migratory steelhead run in Alameda Creek and represent the best native gene pool for restoring a migratory steelhead run below the dams.

The proposed federal protection for all trout in the Alameda Creek watershed has potentially significant implications for water supply and land management activities, including: the proposed rebuilding or enlargement of Calaveras Dam; stream flow releases from Calaveras and San Antonio Reservoirs; a Habitat Conservation Plan being prepared by the SFPUC; and lease activities, such as cattle grazing on SFPUC and East Bay Regional park District lands.

The only other viable steelhead populations in San Francisco Bay tributaries are in Coyote Creek and the Guadalupe River in the South Bay, and San Francisco Creek on the Peninsula. There are currently twelve local, state, and federal agencies cooperating on a number of migratory fish restoration projects in Alameda Creek, including dam removals and construction of fish ladders and fish screens. The restoration projects are aimed at allowing adult steelhead, which have been blocked by barriers in lower Alameda Creek, to reach spawning and rearing habitat 25 miles upstream in Sunol Regional Wilderness.

