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Groups Ask SFPUC To Modify Approach On Creek

Sixty-eight environmental groups, including a few in the Valley, are calling on San Francisco to make changes to its plan for rebuilding its water supply system in the Sunol Valley. They say the changes are needed so that steelhead trout and other aquatic life will prosper.

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) is planning a \$3.4 billion upgrade of its water facilities, including those in Sunol.

The Alameda Creek Alliance (ACA) is the lead organization among the 68 groups calling for the changes. Local groups in the coalition are Friends of the Arroyos, Friends of Sycamore Grove Park, Save Our Sunol and Stop the Dump in Sunol.

The coalition calls for three things.

It wants San Francisco to remove the uppermost dam on the creek, known as the Alameda Creek Diversion Dam (ACDD). The dam diverts up to seven-eighths of the stream water into Calaveras and San Antonio reservoirs, said Jeff Miller, spokesman for ACA. That water is needed to provide better upstream habitat for the fish and other wildlife, said Miller.

The environmentalists also want SFPUC to refrain from building a \$17 million project that would install a two-foot rubber inflatable dam in the Sunol Valley portion of Alameda Creek. The dam would catch water and store it for use in the San Francisco water system. The coalition says that the rubber dam would adversely affect stream levels at certain times of the year that are critical to some fish species.

The group also calls on San Francisco to have an interim plan in place about stream flow before work is undertaken on rebuilding Calaveras Dam.

Michael Carlin, assistant general manager for water for the SFPUC, spoke to the Independent about all three requests. He emphasized that the SFPUC has the same goal as the environmentalists, namely the best habitat for steelhead and other species.

The SFPUC is willing to eliminate the diversion dam, said Carlin. However, the desirability of taking out the dam should be evaluated scientifically, he said. Keeping the dam in place might provide San Francisco more flexibility in managing the stream waters.

"It's important that we have flexibility in meeting the challenge. We can ladder the stream, screen it, have pulse flows, do things that supply the balance we'd like to see. But we can't do it, if there is no diversion dam," he said.

As to the request to eliminate the rubber-dam construction project, Carlin said that the dam will help capture more water for San Francisco's water system. Not installing it would not have any big impact on the stream, since the water doesn't go to the bay, but percolates into the underground water table in Niles Canyon, said Carlin.

Further, it's important to have a variety of habitat, to meet needs of both warm-water and cold-water fish. The stream can't be managed for the benefit of just one species, said Carlin. There has to be a balancing act, he said.

The steelhead trout have been proposed for listing in this section of California. However, the whole listing has been put on hold, said Carlin. More is expected to be known in August. SFPUC will deal with the steelhead regulations when they come out, just as Zone 7 Water Agency, Alameda County Water District, and other agencies that deal with streams, said Carlin.

In calling for having an interim plan in place before work starts on Calaveras Dam construction, Miller said that SFPUC hasn't lived up to its agreement signed in 1997 with state fish and game about providing more water for steelhead. Something should be done now, he said. The SFPUC shouldn't wait until the rebuilding of Calaveras Dam is completed in 2011.

Carlin said it's true SFPUC hasn't lived up to the agreement. He said that the Calaveras Dam was red-tagged as a danger in an earthquake, so only about one-third of its water capacity can be held in the dam, said Carlin. "If we do a release, we would harm the fish in the reservoir," said Carlin.

SFPUC is definitely working on an interim plan for Calaveras Dam reconstruction. In an update since the environmentalists sent out their press release, Carlin said Tuesday that the ACA and affected water agencies met last Friday as part of the process to create that interim plan.

Further, SFPUC stays in touch with state Fish & Game and the federal fisheries agency about stream management, added Carlin.