

No federal protection for landlocked trout

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Rainbow trout landlocked above the Calaveras and San Antonio dams near Sunol Regional Wilderness remain without special federal protection.

Last week, the National Marine Fisheries Service reversed its previous plan to extend the same protections to those so-called "resident" rainbow trout that now exist for their wild downstream cousins -- the Central California Coast steelhead trout.

Steelhead, which migrate to the ocean to mature and return to fresh water to spawn, have been listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act since 1997.

The Alameda Creek Alliance, which for years has been trying to restore a steelhead run along the full stretch of creek and its tributaries, said continuing to treat steelhead and landlocked resident trout as two distinct populations is "arbitrary" given their genetic links.

"All life forms of steelhead in the Bay Area and the central coast should be protected since many streams have only remnant populations of ocean-run fish," said the alliance's Jeff Miller.

Miller said the issue has bearing on plans by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, which controls much of the Alameda Creek watershed for drinking-water supply, to replace the seismically unstable Calaveras Dam south of Sunol.

His group wants the commission to create trout passageways to and from the reservoir as part of its \$270 million dam replacement project, and to provide more steady water flows to help fish in their migrations.

Despite last week's setback, Miller said the commission has indicated it will address concerns over fish. If it does not, Miller promised the alliance will sue.

"State Fish and Game codes require protection of all native fish populations, whether they are listed or not," Miller said.

Also at issue with landlocked trout, said Miller, is degradation of spawning habitat due to cattle grazing leases on watershed lands above San Antonio Reservoir.

In June 2004, the marine fisheries agency had proposed to include landlocked trout, including those in upper Alameda Creek and its tributaries, in the "threatened" category based on genetic findings that they are similar to adult ocean-run steelhead.

But objections were raised by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has traditional jurisdiction over freshwater fish and will, as a result of last week's decision, retain that control over resident trout populations. Miller claimed that due to pressure from the Bush administration, Fish and Wildlife is "extremely unlikely" to voluntarily list the fish as threatened.

San Francisco's Public Utilities Commission had opposed the federal listing of landlocked trout as threatened partly on grounds that the genetic analysis was flawed. Nevertheless, it has vowed to do everything it can to protect the fish.

"We want to do what needs to be done to protect the landlocked fish and the (steelhead) run," said Tim Ramirez of the PUC, noting efforts in the lower stretches of Alameda Creek involve cooperation from other agencies as well.

"We will design our new reservoir to do what we can. We'll do all the things in our power to protect the resident fish, having to balance at all times our water supply role. We didn't build Calaveras Dam for steelhead or resident trout."

For now, the reservoir's level has been significantly lowered due to seismic concerns, making it harder for resident fish to migrate to upstream tributaries or for the agency to make downstream releases for fish.

"Having more storage capacity will help the resident fish in the lake and help with our water supply," Ramirez said.

Meanwhile, he said the commission is working to fence off cattle grazing lands from creek areas to minimize disruption of fish habitat.