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Alameda County Water District Dedicates Fish Screens on Alameda Creek

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Submitted By Frank Jahn

The Alameda County Water District (ACWD) dedicated, on May 20, four fish screens that will improve steelhead trout migration in Alameda Creek. Steelhead trout are listed by the federal government as a threatened species.

Alameda Creek once supported runs of steelhead, and although early data is not available, accounts by locals indicate that steelhead numbering in the thousands once annually went up its waterways. Steelhead fishing was common on the creek until about four decades ago. By the late 1950s, though, the California Department of Fish and Game had decided the steelhead run was no longer viable.

A series of floods in the 1950s prompted the channelization of the lower creek by the Army Corps of Engineers and by the early 1970s the lower 12 miles of the creek was channelized and rip-rapped, with numerous fish passage barriers installed that closed the door on already dwindling anadromous (upward going) fish runs. The last steelhead trout and coho salmon runs were seen in the lower creek in 1963 and 1964. Subsequent flood control and water supply projects in the creek did not allow for migratory fish passage.

Recently, however, there has been an increase in documented sightings of steelhead in the lower creek, potentially due to increased stream flows from wet winters and an increased public awareness of fishery issues. In an effort to restore this threatened species to the watershed, the Alameda Creek Fisheries Workgroup was created in 1999. The Workgroup is a multi-agency stakeholder group and was tasked with developing and implementing a strategy to restore steelhead to Alameda Creek. It is a cooperative effort of 15 local, state, and federal agencies, and has been planning and pursuing funding for fish passage and restoration projects in the watershed for the past nine years. The Workgroup has proposed dam removals, construction of fish ladders at in-stream barriers, installation of fish screens at water diversions, and habitat enhancements.

Several restoration projects have already been completed. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission removed Niles Dam and the Sunol Dam in Niles Canyon in 2006. The Sunol dam was the largest dam ever removed in the Bay Area for fish restoration. In 2003, Zone 7 Water Agency constructed two fish ladders at the confluence of Arroyo Mocho and Arroyo Las Positas in Livermore. And in 2001, the East Bay Regional Park District removed two swim dams from Alameda Creek in Sunol Regional Park.

The most recently completed project is the Alameda County Water District's installation of the Alameda Creek Fish Screens. The fish screens will prevent juvenile steelhead from being carried into ACWD's diversion pipelines and adjacent groundwater recharge ponds at Quarry Lakes Regional Recreation Area. ACWD is planning other fish passage improvements in Alameda Creek as well, including the installation of fish passage facilities at its lower rubber dam, fish ladders at its middle and upper rubber dams, and additional fish screens at other water diversions. The object of these improvements is to create a safe pathway through the flood control channel that steelhead will be able to use to access the upper watershed for spawning.

"The cost of such projects can be a daunting challenge to overcome," noted Paul Piraino, ACWD General Manager at the dedication ceremony today. He went on to say, however, that ACWD has been fortunate to have been awarded a total of \$2.6 million for several of these projects. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation awarded the District \$500,000 for the fish screen project, \$500,000 for the removal of ACWD's lower rubber dam, \$500,000 for the design of a fish ladder over ACWD's upper rubber dam, and \$500,000 for the design of a fish ladder over Alameda County's drop structure and ACWD's middle rubber dam. The District also received a \$600,000 grant through Proposition 50 for the Bunting Fish Screen Project.

The total cost for the fabrication and construction of the fish screen project was approximately \$2.5 million. Speaking at the May 20 ceremony were ACWD General Manager Paul Piraino, ACWD Board President John Weed, Bay-Delta Regional Manager of the California Department of Fish and Game Chuck Armor, Chief of Staff of Supervisor Haggerty's office Chris Gray, and Alameda Creek Alliance Chairman Jeff Miller. The dedication concluded with a demonstration of the lowering of the fish screens into the waters of Alameda Creek.