

# Stopping the Steelhead

A plan to build a new Alameda County dam could block the restoration of a historic steelhead trout run. Plus, the port bans old, dirty trucks.

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No one disputes the fact that the Calaveras Dam should be replaced. Built in 1925, the earthen dam near the Sunol and Ohlone wilderness areas in southeastern Alameda County is seismically unsafe and would likely collapse in a strong earthquake. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, which owns the old dam, hopes to complete a new one by 2012. But the Alameda Creek Alliance, an influential environmental group, says that while it supports the new dam, the commission's plans contain some serious flaws — including blocking a long-time effort to restore a historic steelhead run from San Francisco Bay to the headwaters of Alameda Creek.

Over the past decade, the alliance has worked hard to remove — or build fish ladders over — a dozen barriers on Alameda Creek, and has received millions of dollars in funding from several public agencies to make it happen. The group had hoped its efforts were about to pay off. In just a few years, steelhead were going to be able to swim freely from their spawning grounds near Little Yosemite in Sunol Regional Wilderness down to the bay and back again. The twenty-plus-mile run was to be the first restoration of a migratory steelhead habitat in East Bay history.

But the effort may have been all for naught. Jeff Miller, executive director of the alliance, says the SFPUC is threatening the habitat restoration by proposing to horde too much water behind the new 210-foot-tall dam and refusing to release adequate flows for the fish in dry and normal years. As a result, there likely won't be enough water in Alameda Creek for a sustainable steelhead run. "The proposed flows for steelhead are clearly inadequate," Miller said.

SFPUC officials did not return phone calls seeking comment for this story. But in the past, the commission has contended that it needs to keep as much fresh water behind the dam as it can for its customers in San Francisco and around the Bay Area. Although the SFPUC gets most of its water from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir on the Tuolumne River in Yosemite,

Calaveras is its largest Bay Area reservoir. The commission recently released its draft environmental impact report on the new Calaveras Dam and is accepting public comments through November 20.

According to the draft environmental report, the SFPUC plans to abide by an agreement it made with the state Department of Fish and Game in the 1990s, concerning releasing water from the dam. However, Miller contends that the water flows outlined in the agreement for dry and normal years won't be enough for the fish. He said that over the past few years, a group of environmentalists and biologists have been studying the issue to determine exactly how much water the steelhead will need. But he said the group is still about a year from "getting that question answered." Nonetheless, the SFPUC plans to plow ahead with its plans, citing the urgency of replacing the old dam.

The creek alliance also is unhappy with some of the measures in the SFPUC's proposal to mitigate the environmental damage caused by building a large new dam. Miller observes that the commission is effectively proposing to become a better steward of the land it already controls. "They're supposed to be protecting that land anyway," he said. "What they should be doing is trying to protect private land that is at risk for development."