

Calaveras Dam project revised, may help Alameda Creek

Fremont Bulletin Staff
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The final environmental impact report for the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission project to replace Calaveras Dam in the upper Alameda Creek watershed was released earlier this month. The report includes revisions to the project to supposedly benefit restoration of threatened steelhead trout such as changes to dam operations, constructing a fish ladder and fish screens on a diversion dam, initiating a habitat management plan and providing more water flow in Alameda Creek.

The SFPUC and San Francisco Planning Department voted on approval of the environmental report for the project Jan. 27.

"The revised Calaveras Dam replacement project will significantly advance the restoration of steelhead trout to Alameda Creek through water releases, constraints on water diversions, fish passage projects and other habitat improvements," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "San Francisco should be commended for moving toward more sustainable watershed management and we look forward to working with the SFPUC to restore habitat conditions in upper Alameda Creek.

"However, the SFPUC continues to pursue a Sunol Valley water diversion project that would recapture an unspecified amount of stream flow releases from upstream dams and this could interfere with steelhead migration," he added.

The SFPUC has committed to providing year-round water releases into Alameda Creek from Calaveras Reservoir ranging from five to 12 cubic feet per second, depending on the time of year and water-year type (wet, normal or dry). Particularly important will be cold-water flow releases during summer months to improve water quality and rearing conditions for trout.

The SFPUC will modify operation of a 32-foot diversion dam in upper Alameda Creek, reducing its water diversion capacity by more than 40 percent, closing the diversion gates for more of the year to allow unimpaired natural flow to continue downstream, and ensuring minimum flows of 30 cubic feet per second past the dam during winter and spring.

The SFPUC will also construct a fish ladder around the diversion dam and investigate fish passage improvements downstream to help adult steelhead migrate into the headwaters of Alameda Creek, the best trout habitat in the watershed below major dams. The SFPUC will install a fish screen on the diversion dam and improve screens in the reservoir to prevent small juvenile trout from being diverted or trapped during water operations. The SFPUC also announced a management plan to monitor stream flows and improve

habitat conditions, with a stated goal of restoring a self-sustaining steelhead population in the watershed.

Alameda Creek is becoming an urban stream success story due to ongoing restoration efforts, but it took years of advocacy by conservation groups and tough permit requirements by state and federal regulatory agencies to make the Calaveras Dam project beneficial to steelhead. Alameda Creek is an "anchor watershed" considered regionally significant for restoration of steelhead to the entire Bay Area.

Since central coast steelhead were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1997, numerous agencies have pursued restoration projects to allow migratory fish from the bay to reach spawning habitat in the upper creek. Downstream of San Francisco's dams, 11 fish passage projects at smaller barriers in the creek have been completed since 2001.

Several more major fish ladder and dam removal projects are scheduled for completion the next few years, including a fish ladder in Fremont past the "BART weir" and an Alameda County Water District rubber dam in the lower creek. These projects will allow steelhead to swim to about 20 miles of spawning and rearing habitat in the watershed for the first time in nearly half a century.

The Alameda Creek Alliance is a community watershed group with more than 1,800 members, dedicated to protecting and restoring the natural ecosystems of the Alameda Creek watershed. The Alliance has been working to restore steelhead trout and protect endangered species in the Alameda Creek watershed since 1997.