

FOUR STEELHEAD MOVED OVER BARRIERS IN ALAMEDA CREEK



Release Date: March 15, 1998

Distribution: All Media

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Fisheries biologists and volunteers from the Alameda Creek Alliance successfully moved four steelhead trout over migration barriers in Alameda Creek this morning. The steelhead were part of a school of about a dozen of the threatened fish that had been blocked for over ten days by a concrete weir across the creek, below the B.A.R.T. tracks in Fremont. Using a 350' seine net and smaller fishing nets, the fish were caught and safely transported upstream into Niles Canyon. It is hoped that these fish will spawn in their ancestral habitat in and above the canyon, becoming the progenitors of a restored steelhead run on Alameda Creek.

The fish were identified as wild steelhead, up to 27" long and 7 1/2 pounds in weight. The twenty volunteers who showed up to help move the fish got a good soaking, as the fish fought vigorously to escape the nets. "These steelhead are incredible", said Alliance member Jeff Miller. "They're wild, they're wily, and man, are they strong!" As the fish were netted, they were carried in a cooler full of water up to a waiting East Bay Regional Parks District truck. They were each measured, weighed, photographed, and had a fin clipped, for genetic tests which may give some clues as to their origin. They were then placed in an aerated tank, and driven upstream. All four were healthy and alert when released, and swam off as the best hopes for the return of wild steelhead to the creek. At least three more steelhead were seen that evaded capture.

The steelhead were spotted last Wednesday during a tour of the creek by state and federal fish and game officials, who were viewing the weir to design a fish ladder for the structure. Several steelhead were seen jumping onto the weir, in unsuccessful attempts to get up the slippery concrete slope. An attempt was made to catch the fish, but they managed to evade their would-be rescuers. Another attempt was called off Friday morning because of heavy flows and poor visibility after Thursday's rains. **Tuesday morning at 8:30 AM, Alliance members and the Parks District will be back at the weir, hoping to help more fish upstream.**

The last time steelhead were seen in Alameda Creek in these numbers was in the 1950s. The flood control channel built by the Army Corps of Engineers, along with water district dams and water diversions, decimated dwindling populations of both steelhead and salmon. Anecdotal stories from local fishermen suggests that some remnant of the once prolific steelhead runs managed to return to the creek during wet years since then. **"I know some of the fishermen here have been carrying steelhead and salmon over these dams for years." said Miller. "These people are heroes. We may be seeing the results of their dedication here today."** Steelhead have been documented alone swimming up the creek or in spawning pairs at least three times since December. "This blows the lost fish scenario out of the water" said Miller, referring to a Department of Fish and Game biologist's comments that a steelhead found in December had 'blundered into the wrong creek'.

"This is an incredible experience," said Miller, "but us moving them is only an interim solution. The next step is fish ladders for these barriers, then to make sure there is adequate water released, as required by state and federal law, to make sure the offspring of these fish can get back out to the bay." The Alameda Creek Alliance will be meeting in April with the Army Corps of Engineers, which built the weir, and the Alameda County Flood Control District (ACFCD), which maintains it. Discussion will be about permitting and funding for the fish ladder as well as possible construction of a low-flow channel, to facilitate migration of juvenile fish out to the bay during low flows in the spring. The Alliance also hopes to meet soon with the San Francisco Water Department (SFWD), which operates two large dams upstream, to talk about flow releases for steelhead.

Steelhead, an ocean-going variety of rainbow trout, were listed in the central California coast (including tributaries to San Francisco Bay) as a federally threatened species last August. Southern California runs were listed as endangered. This week the National Marine Fisheries Service designated runs in the Central Valley as threatened. Local environmentalists and fishermen, organized as the Alameda Creek Alliance, have been working since last August to restore the steelhead and salmon runs to Alameda Creek.

This spring, the Alliance will publish its Steelhead Restoration Plan for Alameda Creek. "There's a great sense of loss, especially among people who fished and hiked along this creek when they were young, about what this creek once offered, and what was destroyed. But we also have a vision of what can be again on this creek."

The next meeting of the Alameda Creek Alliance is 7PM Thursday, March 26th, at the Centerville Public Library in Fremont; 3101 Nicolet Ave.

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