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Agencies Begin Study of Stream Flows Needed for Alameda Creek Steelhead Trout Restoration

Multiple Agencies Join in Cooperative Study

Studies to restore threatened steelhead trout within the Alameda Creek watershed will soon get under way. A formal agreement to collaborate on water flow and fish habitat studies was signed this month by 17 public agencies and nonprofit organizations.

“These studies should identify how much water is needed, when it is needed, and in what stream reaches,” said Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. “We believe we can provide water to restore a steelhead run without compromising water supply, and in the process provide beneficial habitat for other native wildlife.”

The agencies signed a Memorandum of Understanding to conduct jointly-funded studies of how much water might be needed at critical times to support a viable steelhead population - while also considering other native fish and wildlife and minimizing potential impacts to drinking water supplies. The \$240,000 technical study will be conducted in two phases by an independent consultant.

Contributions of \$30,000 each were approved this year by four of the signatories - the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC), Livermore-Amador Valley’s Zone 7 Water Agency, Alameda County Water District (ACWD) and Pacific Gas and Electric Company. The \$120,000 provided by these four agencies will be matched by the California State Coastal Conservancy, for a total of \$240,000.

“The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding is a milestone in the process of restoring steelhead to Alameda Creek,” said Paul Piraino, Alameda County Water District General Manager. “Water supply and environmental issues are not always seen as going hand in hand. In this case, however, all the parties agree that these studies are an important step in determining how to provide enough water for both steelhead and the residents of the Bay Area.”

“We have a responsibility to make environmental improvements on Alameda Creek even as we rebuild the seismically vulnerable Calaveras Reservoir upstream,” said SFPUC General Manager Susan Leal. “I believe together we can restore this wonderful and unique steelhead population. I’m proud that our new Natural Resources Division is now a strong partner in the Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup and played such a key role in developing this important agreement.”

Other participating organizations include the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, Alameda County Resource Conservation District, Alameda Creek Alliance, American Rivers, California Department of Fish and Game, East Bay Regional Park District, National Marine Fisheries Service, Natural Resources Defense Council, San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Efforts to restore steelhead to areas of the Alameda Creek watershed where there were historical trout populations are gaining momentum on other fronts as well. For example:

- The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation awarded \$1 million to ACWD to remove an inflatable diversion dam in Alameda Creek and to install fish screens at the district’s water supply diversion point at the mouth of Niles Canyon.
- Agencies are cooperatively pursuing funding to address other barriers to steelhead trying to migrate from San Francisco Bay up Alameda Creek, particularly the “BART weir” in the flood control channel in lower Alameda Creek
- More hurdles to fish passage were cleared last month when the SFPUC completed removal of two obsolete late 19th century dams in Niles Canyon below Sunol.
- PG&E has pledged to make its natural gas line passable to fish as part of a comprehensive plan to restore the riparian habitat of Alameda Creek. The once-buried natural gas line is far upstream. Creek erosion has exposed the pipe.

The largest tributary of southern San Francisco Bay, Alameda Creek may be the best candidate of Bay Area urban streams for restoration of migratory fish runs. Historically, portions of the nearly 700-square mile watershed supported populations of steelhead and coho and chinook salmon. But by the late 1950’s, urban growth in the East Bay had resulted in poor water quality and dams that adversely altered the creek’s hydrology to such a degree that salmon runs disappeared and steelhead dwindled to unsustainably low numbers. Subsequent water supply and flood control projects added barriers that have prevented migratory fish from reaching spawning and rearing habitat.

Steelhead trout in the central California coast (including the Bay Area) were listed under the Endangered Species Act as a federally threatened species in 1997. That same year the Alameda Creek Alliance also began advocating for restoration projects to allow migratory fish to reach spawning and rearing habitat in upper Alameda Creek. A multi-agency fisheries workgroup formed in 1999 is pursuing a concerted effort of creek management and dam modifications or removals to reestablish a healthy steelhead run.

Additional quotes from participating agencies and organizations:

Zone 7 Water Agency

“Zone 7 supports the effort to restore historic steelhead populations in the watershed and will ensure its projects do not impede fish migration in the event they get here,” said agency General Manager Dale Myers. Zone 7 recently installed fish ladders as part of a flood control project in Arroyo las Positas between Livermore and Pleasanton.

California State Coastal Conservancy

“Steelhead are hanging on in the Bay Area by their fins. Everything we can do to provide them with more spawning and rearing habitat will keep alive this part of the Bay Area's ecological heritage. We're participating in this project because Alameda Creek represents one of the best places to restore a viable population of this species,” said Brenda Buxton, Project Manager at the Coastal Conservancy, a state agency that provides funding for habitat restoration and open space protection projects.

Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District

“The Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District is committed to modifying the County-owned ‘BART Weir’ to provide passage for steelhead trout,” said Daniel Woldesenbet, Director of the Alameda County Public Works Agency. “Having led the efforts of the Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup for the past seven years, we are pleased to see the group working cooperatively to collect and generate the critical information needed to make steelhead restoration in this watershed a reality.”

Pacific Gas and Electric Company

“It is wonderful that such a diverse group of stakeholders have come together to work together toward this goal. PG&E is committed to this task and is pleased to contribute \$30,000 toward the creek flows and habitat restoration study,” said Bob Howard, PG&E vice president of gas transmission and distribution. “PG&E also agrees to modify our natural gas line crossing in a manner that won't pose a barrier to the fish, or become a problem should the creek channel change again over time.”

Natural Resources Defense Council

“The signing of the flow studies agreement represents a high level of cooperation and commitment among the groups toward restoring flows and fish to Alameda Creek,” said Monty Schmitt, Restoration Scientist with Natural Resources Defense Council. “For decades, the impacts of flow diversions and surface storage have severely harmed native fish including steelhead. The studies called for in the agreement will determine the flows necessary to restore native fish to the largest watershed in the South Bay while also providing water for residents and businesses.”