Steelhead Trout Back in Lower Alameda Creek

First Confirmed Sighting Since 2008

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Fremont, CA – Members of the Alameda Creek Alliance spotted two adult steelhead trout yesterday in the lower Alameda Creek flood control channel, below an impassable concrete barrier across the creek in Fremont that blocks their spawning migration. The identification of steelhead trout, a federally protected threatened species, was confirmed by a fisheries biologist with the East Bay Regional Park District. Although there have been possible sightings of steelhead in lower Alameda Creek in March 2012 and April 2010, these are the first confirmed steelhead since a single pair of fish, aided upstream by volunteers, spawned in March 2008 in the Stonybrook Creek tributary in Niles Canyon.

"It's not surprising with this rain that steelhead trout are coming back into Alameda Creek, the largest local tributary to San Francisco Bay," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "But this makes it more urgent to finally build the fish ladders that are planned for the flood control channel, so steelhead can migrate upstream through Niles Canyon and into suitable spawning habitat in upper Alameda Creek."

Steelhead trout and salmon were eliminated from the Alameda Creek watershed by the 1960s and 1970s due to construction of dams, water diversions, and instream barriers to migration. Steelhead trout were listed as a federally threatened species in 1997 and the Alameda Creek Alliance has been advocating since then for dam removals and construction of fish ladders to allow migratory fish to reach spawning habitat in and above the Sunol Valley and Sunol Regional Park. Small runs of steelhead were documented in the lower creek from 1997-2008, but an impassable barrier 10 miles from the creek mouth, the BART weir, has prevented them from reaching suitable spawning habitat.

"We've been waiting nearly two decades for these crucial fish passage projects in the lower creek, and migratory fish have been blocked from the Alameda Creek watershed for half a century," said Miller. "We've made a lot of progress on restoration and the agencies should be commended for projects completed so far, but let's get these fish ladders built while we still have steelhead to re-inhabit the creek."

There may be an attempt early next week by East Bay Parks staff and Alameda Creek Alliance volunteers to capture and radio-tag these steelhead and any others blocked below the BART weir, to study their migration. Under state and federal permits, 27 steelhead have been tagged in lower Alameda Creek in recent years and moved past barriers upstream into Niles Canyon. On February 18, six Pacific lamprey (bizarre native fish that resemble eels) were photographed at the BART weir. Lamprey migrate to freshwater for spawning, similar to steelhead. Pacific lamprey, which can suction their way over barriers that block steelhead, are known to spawn in upper Alameda Creek in Sunol Regional Park.

Local, state and federal agencies have been working on multiple projects to allow fish migration, improve stream flows and restore stream and riparian habitat along Alameda Creek and its tributaries. More than 17 fish passage projects have been completed in the watershed since 2001. The Alameda County Water District and Alameda County Flood Control District are planning critical fish ladder projects in the flood control channel that have been delayed for many years now. From 2017-2020, the agencies plan to construct two fish ladders that will allow steelhead to bypass the BART weir and two inflatable rubber dams in the lower creek channel. Nine other fish passage projects are in the planning process. In 2011, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission began rebuilding the seismically-challenged Calaveras Dam in the

upper Alameda Creek watershed. By time construction is completed in 2018, the SFPUC will have constructed a fish ladder and fish screens on an associated diversion dam in upper Alameda Creek and will begin to provide enhanced stream flows below both dams for steelhead trout.

Background

Alameda Creek, the largest watershed of all local streams tributary to the San Francisco Bay, is becoming an urban stream success story after decades of restoration efforts. Since steelhead trout in the Bay Area were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1997, numerous organizations and agencies have cooperated on restoration projects to allow migratory fish to reach spawning habitat in upper Alameda Creek, including dam removals and construction of fish ladders and fish screens. Water agencies are also working on multiple projects to improve stream flows and restore stream and riparian habitat along Alameda Creek and its tributaries. These restoration projects will make up to 20 miles of Alameda Creek and its tributaries accessible to ocean-run fish for the first time in over half a century.

Alameda Creek is considered an 'anchor watershed' for steelhead, since it has regional significance for restoration of the threatened trout to the entire Bay Area. The watershed covers an area of about 680 square miles and once supported populations of steelhead trout and salmon. Steelhead, salmon and lamprey are anadromous fish, living out their adult lives in the ocean and migrating up fresh water streams and rivers to spawn and rear their young. Construction of dams, water diversions, modifications to the Alameda Creek streambed, and urbanization made it impossible for steelhead to migrate upstream, eliminated access to suitable spawning areas, and reduced suitable habitat for cold-water fish.

The Alameda Creek Alliance is a community watershed group with over 2,000 members, dedicated to protecting and restoring the natural ecosystems of the Alameda Creek watershed. The Alameda Creek Alliance has been working to restore steelhead trout to the Alameda Creek watershed since 1997.