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Trout's Reappearance Spawns Controversy

Significance of fish found in Alameda Creek is disputed

[Thayer C. Scott, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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FREMONT -- The genealogy of a dead fish in Fremont has conservationists at odds with state officials.

A boy found the steelhead -- a threatened species of trout rarely seen locally in recent decades -- stranded in a puddle near a flood control channel in Alameda Creek earlier this month. The fish soon died.

Officials of the state Department of Fish and Game downplayed the significance of the discovery, saying the steelhead had probably meandered up the wrong creek on its way to spawn.

But fishers and environmentalists with the Alameda Creek Alliance believe that the 23-inch fish was returning to ancestral spawning grounds near Sunol Regional Park. They say this discovery, along with spot sightings of other steelhead, show that the threatened species is trying to make a comeback in the East Bay.

"So many things have been done in this creek that have been disastrous for the fish, and yet they are still trying to return," alliance spokesman Jeff Miller said.

"Now is the opportunity to do something right."

State law requires water agencies to support fish populations by allowing them to spawn downstream. The Alameda Creek Alliance believes that the steelhead find shows that there is a population in Fremont to support. It wants environmental and water officials to try to restore the steelhead runs by changing or removing dams and other obstacles to the fish.

The Department of Fish and Game wrote off the steelhead in Alameda Creek during the 1950s after environmental damage and water obstacles had prevented the fish from migrating and spawning in the creek.

Miller charges that for political and bureaucratic reasons, the state does not want to acknowledge the possibility that the steelhead are making a comeback.

“A steelhead run would mean more work for them,” Miller said. “They don't want to deal with it.”

Bob Snyder, an inland fisheries supervisor with the Department of Fish and Game, says the shallow, silty, warm waters of Alameda Creek would preclude the steelhead -- which require cold and pristine waters to reproduce -- from returning in any significant numbers.

“It is futile for us to develop fish runs when they don't stand a chance of making it,” Snyder said.

The creek has been dammed and channeled to supply drinking water. Bringing back the steelhead would require a major and expensive diversion of water from supporting people to supporting fish.

“And if it gets down to man versus fish, the fish is going to lose every time,” Snyder said.

He said Fish and Game, which plants 7 million fish per year in 15 counties, would rather concentrate on maintaining the steelhead run in places like the Sacramento River than spend time and money on what he believes is a futile quest to return them to Alameda Creek.

“It's a question of priorities and common sense,” Snyder said.

Miller said the interim changes the Alameda Creek Alliance seeks -- which include lowering inflatable dams and building fish ladders to help steelhead swim over the barriers in dry seasons -- are reasonable.

“Restoring fisheries could cause technical problems,” said Paul Piraino, an assistant manager with the Alameda County Water District, which operates three dams across the creek. “Good science needs to be behind any decision.”

Jennifer Nielson, a Stanford University research scientist with Hopkins Marine Laboratory in Pacific Grove, said the state's explanation that the Alameda Creek fish was a stray is plausible. But so is the creek group's belief that the steelhead are trying to return, she said.

Her research in Southern California creeks suggests that steelhead can survive in waterways altered by human development, she said.

“I don't see why it wouldn't be the case in the Bay Area,” Nielson said, given that the East Bay has more water and less pollution than steelhead habitats she studied.

Nielson plans to perform genetic tests on the dead fish from Alameda Creek to determine its origin. But she said she will not be able to pinpoint which creek the fish came from, only which river system.

Regardless of the findings, the creek alliance will continue to press water districts to make Alameda Creek more fish-friendly.

“Each of these fish has made an incredible journey to return to this creek,” Miller said. “Who can sit and watch an endangered species expire right in their backyard without stepping in to help?”