

Steelhead's likely return is reason to celebrate

Barriers, dams to be rebuilt for species

By Matt Carter
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It's looking more and more likely that steelhead trout will again be swimming through Fremont, Pleasanton and Livermore on their way to historic spawning grounds.

That's cause for celebration, say those who have been laying plans to get the ocean-going fish around dams and other barriers in Alameda Creek.

From 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, they'll stage the first Steelhead Festival and Watershed Awareness Fair in Fremont's Niles Community Park. The event will include a road race, music, food and displays to educate the public about plans to restore the threatened fish.

"The idea of the festival is to celebrate what's been accomplished so far," said the Alameda Creek Alliance's Jeff Miller. "We don't have restored fish runs yet, but we're well on the way. We need to build awareness that these fish are returning to the creek, and of what we could have here."

Miller envisions a day in the not-so-distant future when visitors flock to the creek to watch steelhead dart through the current to reach historic spawning grounds upstream of Fremont.

Fish on their way to about 20 miles of spawning grounds would muscle their way through Pleasanton in the Arroyo de la Laguna and Arroyo del Valle and through Livermore in the Arroyo Mocho.

Four agencies — the Alameda County Flood Control District, the Alameda County Water District, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and the East Bay Regional Park District — now have plans to remove some dams in the Alameda Creek watershed or build fish ladders around them by 2003.

The agencies, along with the Alameda Creek Alliance,

the California Department of Fish and Game and the California Coastal Conservancy, are all members of a work group that's concluded it's not too late to restore the steelhead to much of Alameda Creek and its tributaries.

Genetic tests of landlocked rainbow trout in the Alameda Creek watershed show the fish are probably descendants of steelhead that once migrated to the ocean, returning to freshwater streams to spawn. The landlocked trout could serve as the breeding stock for the restoration of steelhead runs, a study released by the work group in March concluded.

The first serious barriers to fish migration are a weir protecting a BART rail crossing in Fremont and three inflatable dams used by the water district to divert water from the creek. The county flood control and water districts plan to apply this fall for up to \$5 million in federal grant money for a fish ladder and other projects to get fish around those barriers.

Further upstream, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission plans to modify or remove the Sunol and Niles dams in Niles Canyon. Pacific Gas and Electric Co. is studying how fish might be helped around a 10-foot-high concrete weir protecting a gas line that crosses the creek near Sunol.

And back in the Sunol Regional Wilderness, the East Bay Regional Park District plans to help steelhead reach spawning grounds by demolishing two small concrete dams about 16 miles downstream from the headwaters of Alameda Creek.

"The California Department of Fish and Game is extremely pleased with the cooperative nature of this group and the resources and commitment of time that's been brought to the table" by members of the work group, said Pat Coulston, a senior Fish and Game biologist.

The threatened Central Coast steelhead is protected

under the federal Endangered Species Act. A successful restoration of steelhead could require some changes in how Alameda Creek, its tributaries, and the land around them are used.

A program in which about 10,000 hatchery trout are stocked in the Niles Canyon stretch of Alameda Creek for recreational fishing would have to be moved somewhere else to prevent those fish from breeding with wild steelhead. While catch-and-release fishing is allowed in some of the state's steelhead streams, it might be a long time before anglers would be permitted to fish for trout in Alameda Creek again, Coulston said.

The East Bay Regional Park District, which is currently reviewing its cattle grazing policies systemwide, may have to put up fences or take other steps to keep cattle out of creeks that steelhead might spawn in, said Park District Fisheries Specialist Pete Alexander.

"The National Marine Fisheries Service has already identified grazing as a negative impact on steelhead habitat, so there are plans to fence those areas off," Alexander said.

Whether further restrictions on grazing near the creeks will be required is open to debate, he added.

Although steelhead will be the center of attention at Saturday's celebration, the event is also a chance to increase public awareness of the importance of protecting the watershed, said Forest Frasier, the city of Fremont's environmental specialist.

The Steelhead Festival and Watershed Awareness Fair takes place from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday at Niles Community Park in Fremont. For more information on the free event, call the Alameda Creek Alliance at (510) 845-4675. A 10-kilometer road race and 5-kilometer run/walk is scheduled for 9 a.m. Registration is \$25. For information, call (510) 657-6179.