

Regulations would protect endangered steelhead trout

By Alec Rosenberg
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The federal government has agreed to issue regulations to protect the threatened steelhead trout in Alameda Creek and across the state, environmental groups announced Wednesday.

"It's definitely a step in the right direction," said Jeff Miller, spokesman for the Alameda Creek Alliance. "The next step is to ensure that these protective regulations adequately address the major threat to steelhead: dams, water diversions and habitat destruction."

The alliance is part of a coalition of eight environmental and fishing groups that sued the National Marine Fisheries Service in June to get the agency to

issue regulations for the steelhead trout.

The agreement settles the lawsuit and puts the service on a path to issue a proposed rule for the protective regulations by Dec. 15 and final rule by June 15.

"We're moving along the road to recovery for steelhead," stated Peter Galvin, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, another group that joined in the lawsuit. "The regulations are a necessary step if we want future generations to be able to enjoy watching steelhead return to local streams."

The National Marine Fisheries Service listed Central Valley populations of steelhead as threatened spe-

cies in March 1998 and central (including Alameda Creek) and southern California coast populations in August 1997.

Environmental groups filed the lawsuit because, two years later, the agency failed to create regulations protecting the steelhead. Agency officials have said they wanted to make sure the steelhead regulations did not conflict with other regulations. No one at the agency could be reached for comment Wednesday afternoon.

While the regulations could involve costly changes in how the state water system is managed, they are needed to have federal protections against killing or harming steelhead, Miller said.

"Just listing them doesn't do any-

thing," Miller said. "There's a lot of frustration because fish are getting killed and habitat is being destroyed without federal protection."

Steelhead trout were once abundant in Alameda Creek. For decades, they were considered extinct from the creek, but several have been spotted in the past two years.

The steelhead need help surviving in Alameda Creek because dams and other flood control barriers keep them from spawning.

The Alameda Creek Alliance has been working with the Alameda County Water District and county flood control district to get fish ladders built so steelhead can bypass creek barriers. A county feasibility study on fish ladders

should be done in January, said Miller who is optimistic the project will go ahead.

It is estimated that fewer than 20,000 steelhead migrate up California streams each year during spawning season.

The agreement announced Wednesday affects coastal steelhead runs from the Russian River in Sonoma County to the Santa Maria River in San Luis Obispo County, as well as the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and their tributaries and floodplains of San Francisco and San Pablo bays.

A similar agreement has been reached for steelhead in Idaho, Oregon and Washington.