STEELHEAD TROUT PAIR MAY BE SPAWNING IN STONYBROOK CREEK:
First in Alameda Creek Watershed Since 1960s

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Fremont, CA – A pair of radio tagged steelhead trout that were given a helping hand last week past a barrier in lower Alameda Creek swam up Stonybrook Creek in Niles Canyon where they were observed traveling together and exhibiting spawning behavior last weekend. This marks the first time that adult steelhead have attempted to spawn in suitable trout habitat in the Alameda Creek watershed since the early to mid 1960s, a significant milestone in the decades-long effort to restore steelhead and salmon to Alameda Creek.

Bonnie (a female steelhead measuring 27 inches long and weighing 8.5 pounds) and Clyde (a male 28 inches and 8 pounds) were initially observed in the lower Alameda Creek flood control channel in Fremont on February 25th, attempting to jump the BART weir, an impassable fish barrier. They were netted by Alameda Creek Alliance volunteers, East Bay Regional Park District biologists, and Alameda County staff operating under state and federal permits on February 26th, fitted with radio tags and moved upstream into Niles Canyon.

"This is a nice hint of what is to come with the restoration of Alameda Creek fish runs," said Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "Residents along Alameda Creek and its tributaries could literally see steelhead and salmon spawning in their backyard creeks within a few years. Our goal is to gain access for these fish all the way up Alameda Creek into and above Sunol Regional Wilderness and to ensure there is adequate stream flow for them to thrive."

Both fish are currently holding together in a pool in the creek and could attempt to spawn again. In March of 1999 a female steelhead dubbed "Stella" was rescued at the BART weir and later swam into Stonybrook Creek, where it is believed she spawned with resident rainbow trout. Stonybrook Creek has almost two miles of suitable habitat for spawning and rearing of trout and steelhead, but several road crossing culverts are in the lower creek. CalTrans has committed to replace a culvert at the bottom of Stonybrook Creek with a free span bridge. In 2005 Alameda County completed conceptual designs for modifying or removing two county culverts for fish passage in lower Stonybrook Creek. Stonybrook Creek and Alameda Creek in Niles Canyon are off-limits to fishing.

This is the 11th consecutive winter the Alameda Creek Alliance has documented ocean-run steelhead in lower Alameda Creek. Construction of a fish ladder is planned at the BART weir and an adjacent rubber dam by 2010, so that steelhead can migrate on their own past the barrier to more suitable cold water spawning and rearing habitat upstream. Since steelhead were listed as a federally threatened species in 1997 the Alameda Creek Alliance has been advocating for dam removals and construction of fish ladders to allow fish to reach spawning habitat in and above the Sunol Valley and Sunol Regional Park. There are 15 local, state, and federal agencies cooperating on fish passage projects in Alameda Creek, including dam removals and construction of fish ladders and fish screens. 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.

Until fish passage projects are completed, fisheries biologists and volunteers have been given annual permits by the California Department of Fish and Game and the federal agency National Marine Fisheries Service to move blocked or stranded fish from the Alameda Creek flood control channel to suitable habitat upstream, and to track them with radio transmitters to learn more about their migration and habitat needs. The Alameda County Water District (ACWD) and Alameda County Flood Control District are moving forward with four fish passage projects in the lower creek, including a fish ladder that will allow fish to bypass the BART weir and middle ACWD rubber dam, removing ACWD's lower rubber dam, and installing fish screens at several water diversions.

The Alameda Creek watershed covers an area of about 680 square miles and once supported populations of steelhead trout and salmon. Steelhead and salmon 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. As a result, steelhead have been absent from Alameda Creek and its tributaries for several decades.

Seventeen public agencies and nonprofit organizations signed an agreement in 2006 to collaborate on studies of stream flows and fish habitat needed for Alameda Creek steelhead restoration. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) recently began environmental review for capital improvement projects to the San Francisco water supply system, including nine projects along Alameda Creek in the Sunol Valley. The largest is the Calaveras Dam Replacement Project, to rebuild the seismically vulnerable Calaveras Dam. The Alameda Creek Alliance is pushing for the project to include minimum flow releases from Calaveras Reservoir to help spawning, rearing and migration of steelhead in Alameda Creek below the dam, and the removal of the Alameda Diversion Dam from upper Alameda Creek.

Unfortunately, the SFPUC so far has dismissed consideration of the impacts of their three dams on steelhead trout in Alameda Creek in their programmatic environmental review for the retrofits to San Francisco's water system. The draft Environmental Impact Report for the dam replacement project is due out this summer. The SFPUC is also proposing other water supply projects in the Sunol Valley that could further harm fish and wildlife in Alameda Creek. The SFPUC's failure to include Alameda Creek stream restoration as part of the Calaveras Dam rebuild and controversial SFPUC proposals to divert more water from Alameda Creek could unnecessarily jeopardize the schedule for water system upgrades.

The non-profit Alameda Creek Alliance last year celebrated ten years of working to restore Alameda Creek and its native fish populations. The Alliance, formed in August 1997 after steelhead trout in the Central California Coast were listed as a threatened species, has grown to an organization of 1,500 members.