

## Contra Costa Times (Walnut Creek, CA)

October 16, 1997

**Section:** sports

**Edition:** Final

**Page:** D08

**Column:** outdoors

### EL NINO AND ACTIVISTS AID RETURN OF SALMON

*Jerry Gandy*

WITH HEAVY RAINS predicted from El Nino during the winter, Jeff Miller of Canyon and a few of his friends are expecting runs of salmon and steelhead in Alameda Creek.

Man-made obstacles prevent the creek from being hospitable to steelies and chinooks, but the fish keep trying to return to the watershed.

Miller and his associates have formed a group to help restore the runs of anadromous fish to the 700-square mile watershed, largest in the East Bay.

The Alameda Creek Alliance members intend to see that the fish can make their way upstream to the quality spawning habitat above Niles Canyon.

Last winter's heavy rains brought salmon numbers not seen in several decades to spawn in South Bay streams, including more than 1,000 in the Guadalupe River running through downtown San Jose.

Salmon were seen last Thanksgiving Day in Alameda Creek below a concrete drop structure constructed to stabilize the Western Pacific Railroad tracks in Fremont.

Political barriers have proved as deadly to the fish as the physical obstacles, according to alliance members. Various water agencies control stream flows and water diversions from Alameda Creek.

There must be adequate stream flows through late spring for the steelhead to survive. And there has to be adequate water for the juvenile fish to return to the bay.

Chinook and coho salmon and steelhead once ran in large numbers up Alameda and other Bay Area creeks. In addition to Niles Canyon, the Sunol and Ohlone Regional Wildernesses offer good spawning grounds.

The runs virtually were destroyed by urbanization and the accompanying dam construction and water projects.

The alliance members complain that misguided flood control channelization of streams and water diversions also led to the demise of the runs of fish which now are listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

The Department of Fish & Game claims that wild steelhead runs were eliminated from Alameda Creek in the 1950s, but local anglers have seen the fish attempting to come upstream to spawn during many wet winters, the most recent being four years ago.

During last year's salmon run, concerned citizens took it upon themselves to carry the fish over the Western Pacific Railroad invert.

"It is truly remarkable that even remnant populations of these fish have survived, despite the development and the abuse inflicted upon this creek," Miller declared. "These fish are fighters, a testament to the power of nature, and we owe it to them to make sure they have the habitat to survive and to thrive."

"It's very exciting," Miller added. "Who doesn't want to see large ocean-going fish flopping up their back-yard creek to spawn?"

The State Department of Water Resources proposed Alameda Creek as the top candidate in the state for urban creek restoration two decades ago.

In 1989, a citizens' group called Friends of Alameda Creek attempted to restore steelhead and salmon runs, and eight public agencies published a feasibility and cost analysis study of returning steelies to the stream.

No further action was taken because of opposition from water agencies.

"Now, eight years later," pointed out Miller, "both steelhead and salmon have been federally listed under the Endangered Species Act, theoretically giving them some protection."

Miller's alliance was formed to make that protection a reality.

"We will do whatever it takes to help these fish reestablish themselves," Miller said. "We'll be out on the creek this winter documenting the fact that the fish are indeed here so we will have a case to take to the Department of Fish & Game and the National Marine Fisheries Service."

The alliance intends to provoke action for the protection of the threatened species.

"Pressure on the agencies responsible, lawsuits, carrying trapped fish over barriers, restoration work there's lots of work to be done," Miller said. "But the rewards are immeasurable the return of a wild species to our watershed."