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TROUT MAY GET LIFT ON TRIP TO BREEDING GROUNDS

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After a dispute between county officials and environmentalists, it now appears that steelhead trout may get their chance to mate in Alameda Creek.

The Alameda County Flood Control District will begin studies in about two months on the possibility of building "ladders" near flood control channels that would allow the trout to head for popular fish mating grounds at the mouth of Niles Canyon.

Now, the fast-traveling fish, arriving from the San Francisco Bay into the creek to meet partners, are blocked by a concrete weir under the Union Pacific railroad tracks in east Fremont.

Local environmental activists have been pushing for construction of the ladders for a few years. Until recently, county water officials have flatly rejected the idea.

But flood control officials say they now are taking a close look at building the ladders.

"The county is very interested in doing this," said Richard Wetzig, an Alameda County flood control district scientist in charge of the project.

Alameda County Water District officials, who have said new construction in flood control areas may affect water supply operations, have also agreed to look at the study.

"There still needs to be some good science done that no one has done or come up with," said district water supply engineer Jim Reynolds. "Is the general public willing to accept things that might get changed because of that?"

If the ladders are approved, construction would start in two years at the earliest.

The ladders would be made of concrete, built like ascending small puddles, to allow the fish to easily jump from one to the other and eventually over the top of the weir.

Flood control officials place the cost of such structures at from $500,000 to $1 million.

In the Bay Area, the closest similar structure is in Felton in Santa Cruz County.

A state grant will allow flood control officials to commission a feasibility study of the ladders.

If flood control and water district officials approve, the Army Corps of Engineers, through a federal program, can provide up to 75 percent of the funding for the project.

In the meantime, environmentalists say, swarms of steelhead trout continue to bang up against the low-lying weir.

Not only are they blocked from their spawning grounds, but they also continue to bang away at the weir until becoming exhausted and trapped at the waters under the bridge.

"Some of them, I'm sure, just die," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance, which has been badgering flood control and water district officials and local politicians since 1997 to help the fish get to each other.

The steelhead trout, which can grow to up to 3 feet, are listed as a threatened species in the central California coastal area by the federal government.

If they can someday get over the weir with the help of ladders, they'll join their smaller rainbow trout brethren, who have already established the spawning grounds.

The traveling steelhead trout spend most of their life in the open sea, where plenty of food such as smaller fish and other marine life is available.

The fish also have to dodge a host of predators.

But when mating time comes, they need to return to cool fresh water with vegetation for the offspring, which the waters at the mouth of Alameda Creek offer.

The steelhead for years traveled freely through Alameda Creek to meet mates at the spawning grounds.

But since the 1950s, when dams, flood control channels and other construction started taking place in the East Bay, it had been almost an impossible task, environmentalists say.