Alameda Creek Alliance Pushes Steelhead Restoration Plan Forward

By: Dan Bacher

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In an ambitious plan that reverses years of habitat degradation, steelhead and chinook salmon will again be able to ascend the upper reaches of Alameda Creek above Niles Canyon, thanks to the efforts of a dedicated group of anglers and environmentalists.

The plan, slated for completion by 2004-2005, focuses on completing fish passage projects involving either dam removal or construction of fish ladders past barriers in the lower creek so that steelhead and king salmon can again migrate upstream. The main project includes a $6.7 million proposal funded by the US Army Corps of Engineers to build a fish ladder on the BART Weir in Niles and to remove dams in Niles Canyon.

Ironically, two of the same agencies that presided over the destruction of the creek's steelhead run, the Army Corps of Engineers and California Department of Fish and Game, are now helping to restore the creek through a consortium of eleven local, state and federal agencies. These fish passage projects will allow sea-run steelhead trout and chinook salmon to access spawning and rearing habitat in Niles Canyon, tributaries in Sunol Valley and Alameda Creek through the Sunol Valley Wilderness.

"I was inspired by seeing the runs of coho salmon that returned to Lagunitas Creek, through the efforts of Trout Unlimited and other groups, on a trip that I made there," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance.

"After steelhead were proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act in 1997, I thought we should start restoring Alameda Creek, the largest watershed in the East Bay with over 700 square miles."

Miller built on the previous years of efforts by Friends of Alameda Creek, a group of local anglers and environmental activists that tried to pressure local, state and federal agencies to restore the creek.

The lower creek is much different now than it was 50 years ago. The disastrous 1955 flood in Fremont spurred the Army Corps of Engineers to re-route the creek below Niles Canyon into a flood control channel, abandoning the natural creek channel. When the BART weir was built in the early 1970's, steelhead were completely prevented from getting upstream through Niles Canyon to spawn.

The attitude of the DFG towards restoration on Alameda Creek was exemplified by a memo from Keith R. Anderson, Associate Fishery biologist, on June 17, 1975 that essentially wrote off the creek as a steelhead fishery. "Following a comprehensive discussion, the Regional Manager

stated that Region 3 will not actively promote steelhead restoration on Alameda Creek at this time," said Anderson. "There is little public expression of interest on the subject and no expression of interest from the water agencies in the basin."

However, the passage of a series of fishery restoration laws and the steelhead's listing under the Endangered Species Act, prodded by intensive lobbying efforts by United Anglers and other fishery groups, paved the way for a change in attitude by the state and federal governments.

"This creek has a very high potential for restoration," stated Erika Cleugh, DFG fisheries biologist, working with the Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Work Group. "Although we have no real handle on the exact carrying capacity of the stream, we know that Alameda is a large creek capable of maintaining a self-sustaining population of steelhead. We now have legislation, such as SB 271, that provides funding for the protection and the restoration of these fish."

Although the plan focuses on fish passage, "once we get access to the creek, other issues will come up, including spawning gravels and the restoration of cool rearing habitat in the creek and its tributaries during the summer," according to Cleugh.

Miller and alliance volunteers have documented through photos and eyewitness accounts the historical presence of steelhead, chinook salmon and even coho salmon in the system. He estimates that 20 to 50 steelhead, along with a handful of king salmon, make into the lower creek below BART every year. Miller and volunteers have in the past carried these steelhead over the barriers to spawn upstream.

"The fish are 18 to 28 inches long and weigh 3 to 6 pounds," he stated. "The genetic tests we've conducted conclude that these steelhead are similar to the native trout populations in the creek above Calaveras Reservoir. These steelhead become landlocked in Calaveras Reservoir in 1925 and San Antonio Reservoir in 1966."

The alliance volunteers are now working with the San Francisco Public Utility District (SFPUC) to move the smolts from upstream tributaries into the lower creek, in effect "jump starting" the run with genetically diverse native trout, according to Miller.

In addition, Miller said other fish passage projects under the plan include:

- The replacement of a culvert in Stonybrook Creek in Niles Canyon by CalTrans.
- The East Bay Regional Park District's removal of two swim dams in the Sunol Valley Wilderness area in September 2001.
- The SFPUC's plan to remove the Niles and Sunol Dams in Niles Canyon.

Although fish passage problems are being resolved, the working group is just starting to discuss the problem of maintaining adequate flows for fish migration and rearing. "I'm pretty confident that we will get dedicated flows for steelhead and other fish, as required under the State Fish and Game Code," said Miller.

The creek's restoration plan shows what a group of citizens - 300 at last count- can do when they engage in grass roots organizing. "This was a stream that was once written off as a fishery by the flood control and water agencies," said Miller. "Our hope now is that water supply and flood control needs on the creek will be balanced with fishery needs in the future."

If you want to become a volunteer for the Alliance, particularly the smolt collection project in Sunol Valley Wilderness, contact Jeff Miller at (510) 845-4675, website: http://www.alamedacreek.org.