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Inflatable dam may threaten steelhead

Arroyo Mocho flood control project won't block fish, utility says

Matt Carter, STAFF WRITER

PLEASANTON -- Environmental groups are wary of a plan by the Valley's water wholesaler to build an inflatable rubber dam between Livermore and Pleasanton to divert water from the Arroyo Mocho into man-made lakes. The dam -- and another project to widen the arroyo -- could block migrating steelhead trout, if ongoing efforts to reintroduce the oceangoing fish to Alameda Creek are successful, environmental activists say.

Zone 7 water agency officials say they are cooperating with a task force that's working on steelhead restoration, and that the projects can be designed and operated so they don't interfere with fish migration.

At issue are two projects to be considered by Zone 7's board of directors next month.

A planned three-foot-high inflatable dam near El Charro Road wouldn't interfere with steelhead migration because it would only be used during dry months when fish aren't in the stream, said Zone 7 Principal Engineer Jim Horen.

The dam would be used to divert water that's pumped into the Arroyo Mocho from the State Water Project into the Chain of Lakes, a series of man-made water storage pits to be built in exhausted rock quarries along Stanley Boulevard.

But Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance believes Zone 7 will someday want to use the dam to divert natural rainfall from the arroyo at times when steelhead are migrating.

Although Zone 7 had a year-round permit to divert up to 10,000 acre feet annually from the arroyo, the permit was revoked in 1986 because quarrying continued in the future Chain of Lakes. "They acknowledge that they have ambitions to regain that right, and they're going to have a facility there," Miller said. "It's unimaginable to me that they would not try to use that facility to divert water."

Miller said Zone 7 has not completed an adequate environmental study of the diversion dam's potential impacts. The dam might also create an "impoundment," attracting predators of the protected California red-legged frog like bass, bluegill and bullfrogs, he said.

Horen said the environmental studies conducted for both projects, called a mitigated negative declaration, satisfy state environmental laws.

But Miller wants the agency to conduct a more extensive environmental impact report, which would also identify potential alternatives to the project, such as water conservation and recycling. If the Zone 7 Board of Directors approves the project on Dec. 18 without such a study, the Alameda Creek Alliance and Friends of the Arroyos will consider filing suit to force Zone 7 to conduct an environmental impact report, Miller said.

The groups also want Zone 7 to conduct an environmental report for a separate project to widen Arroyo Mocho downstream of El Charro Road. The project, which would improve the concrete-

lined flood control channel's carrying capacity, would require building a 10-foot high "drop structure" that Miller said will also impede steelhead.

Zone 7 officials say that project, and the inflatable dam, are being designed so that fish ladders or jumping pools can be built later, if needed.

"Zone 7 is part of this whole (steelhead) restoration project, and neither (the dam or the drop structure) will do anything to inhibit that," Horen said.

Zone 7 is accepting written comments on its mitigated negative declaration for the drop structure until Nov. 19. The comment period for the study of the proposed inflatable dam closes Nov. 21.