Attempted Fish Rescue Points Out Need For Dam Removal On Alameda Creek

By: Dan Bacher

March 21, 2003

In a move that surprised fish restoration advocates, the National Marine Fisheries Service allowed East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) biologists to attempt a rescue of a spawning pair of steelhead trapped below barriers in the flood control channel of Alameda Creek in Fremont.

On Thursday, March 13, a park ranger spotted a male steelhead and a smaller female trying to spawn in an isolated pool below the BART weir and an Alameda County Water District rubber dam. Both barriers prevent migratory fish from accessing suitable habitat upstream in the creek. The Alameda Creek Alliance and Pete Alexander, EBRPD biologist, asked permission from NMFS to remove and move them upstream where they could spawn successfully.

On Friday, the biologists managed to trap three adult steelhead measuring 28 inches each with a seine net, but they were unable to net the female. "We decided to release the three steelhead back into the pool, since it didn't make any sense to put them above the dam unless there was a female for them to spawn with," he said.

Alexander noted that two of the three males were hatchery fish of undetermined origin, while the other fish was wild. The spawning pair can't spawn successfully in the concrete flood control channel because there is no suitable gravel to spawn in, nor cold water for the yearlings to rear in, since the creek dries up during the summer.

The stranding of these fish points out the hazards that the remnant run on Alameda creek has to contend with every winter. The creek had fishable, viable runs of steelhead trout and king salmon until the 1960s when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers channelized the creek and a series of dams and other barriers were constructed. Coho salmon also used the huge watershed of Alameda Creek to spawn.

Adult steelhead trout, listed as a federally threatened species in 1997, have been documented in this location in lower Alameda Creek 5 of the past 6 winters, according to Jeff Miller, president of the Alameda Creek Alliance. The best year was 1998, when an estimated 25 adult steelhead appeared in the lower creek. In 2002, an estimated 20 fish tried to spawn in the stream.

In past years, community volunteers have moved a few stranded fish upstream out of the flood control channel, where stream temperatures are hostile to fish eggs and young, water flows are often cut off by operation of the rubber dams, and eggs and young fish face a gauntlet of avian and introduced fish predators, according to Miller. More stringent permit requirements by federal and state regulatory agencies, NOAA Fisheries and the CA Department of Fish and Game, make it difficult to get permits to move the fish, even when they are trapped in unsuitable habitat.

"We were surprised that they allowed us to attempt the fish rescue," said Miller, "since in the past NMFS would say we were harassing the fish. However, the fact that we saw the fish trying to spawn in a

completely unviable habitat is what probably permitted the rescue."

"These fish need access to trout habitat upstream in Sunol Regional Park," he emphasized. "We can't continue to have endangered fish dying here without successful spawning year after year. We have been advocating for fish passage projects for six years now, and although there is an ongoing planning process, steelhead and salmon continue to be illegally blocked by these barriers."

The continuing annual appearance of adult ocean-run fish blocked in the lower channel underscores the importance of an interim program to move these fish upstream to suitable spawning and rearing areas.

Miller said that in the absence of an approved project or program for permanent fish passage, the failure to implement a program to move these fish exposes the agencies with barriers in the lower creek to liability for illegal "take" of a listed species and ongoing violations of Sections 5901 and 5937 of the CA Fish and Game Code.

A consortium of 12 local, state, and federal agencies has been planning for steelhead trout restoration projects in the Alameda Creek watershed since 1999. Proposed projects include: constructing fish ladders at the BART weir and ACWD rubber dams; removing Niles and Sunol Dams in Niles Canyon; and making a PG&E gas pipeline crossing in the Sunol Valley passable to fish.

The group is also planning, as part of the proposed replacement and expansion of San Francisco's Calaveras Reservoir, removing or altering the Alameda Diversion Dam from upper Alameda Creek, and potentially moving landlocked trout from above the reservoir to the lower creek to "jump-start" an ocean-run population.

"The SFPUC has agreed in principle to the idea of taking landlocked fish from the upper watershed of the creek as early as next year," said Miller.

"Right now they are doing a survey of native trout populations to see if they're robust enough to jump start the run in the lower creek. They are also looking at the timing of the runs. The landlocked steelhead in Calaveras and San Antonio reservoirs use the lakes much as they would the ocean - they look very much like ocean fish. The juveniles look like smolts, with their parr marks disappearing as they enter the lake."

The removal of the Alameda Diversion Dam would open up the watershed above the "Little Yosemite" area and upstream of the confluence of Alameda and Calaveras Creeks, some of the best spawning habitat on the creek.

Providing additional water flows from the reservoir for fish habitat downstream is also a big goal of the consortium. "We will push for minimum flows that don't exist on the creek now," he added. "The expansion of Calaveras Reservoir would provide the release of cold water to provide summer rearing habitat for steelhead."

Want to help? The Alameda Creek Alliance, a community restoration group formed in 1997 that is working to protect and restore Alameda Creek and its tributaries, needs your support. Contact the ACA at (510) 845-2233, alamedacreek@hotmail.com, or www.alamedacreek.org.