

June 23, 2004

Protection of resident rainbow trout eyed

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CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Rainbow trout land-locked in the reservoirs above the Calaveras and San Antonio dams in Sunol and in Alameda Creek would be granted federal protection if a proposal announced last week is adopted.

A proposal by the National Marine Fisheries Service would group so-called "resident" rainbow trout in the creek with their wild cousins -- the Central California Coast steelhead trout. Steelhead trout have been listed as a "threatened" species under the Endangered Species Act since 1997.

Differences between the two fish are slight. Recent studies by the U.S. Geological Survey found rainbow trout above the dams are so genetically similar to the protected steelhead trout that they are essentially two branches of the same species.

These findings prompted the NMFS, the federal agency that protects, manages and conserves threatened or endangered marine life, to propose the new protections.

"Scientifically and biologically it makes more sense to list all the fish," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "In effect, this rule just kind of helps the actual biology of steelhead trout catch up with regulatory protection."

Alameda Creek runs from the hills above Livermore through Niles Canyon and into Fremont.

The new protections would mean catch-and-release fishing would be allowed but the fish could not be removed. The change could have significant impacts on water supply and land management -- including water flow releases from the dams, to ensure year-round water flow, and cattle-grazing leases on watershed land.

Rainbow trout complete their entire life cycle in fresh water, while steelhead migrate to the ocean to mature and return to fresh water to spawn.

Under current regulations, any trout upstream of Fremont -- where a weir obstructs access to Alameda Creek where the creek crosses the BART tracks -- are considered "resident" fish and are not federally protected, said Jeff Hagar, a fishery biologist and consultant for Alameda County working with the Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup.

The weir is impassable and prevents steelhead coming in from the ocean from reaching their spawning habitat upstream.

NMFS will accept public comment on the proposal until Sept. 13.

Rainbow trout in the reservoirs are particularly important because experts believe they are descendants of steelhead trout trapped when the dams were built.

"Fish up in the reservoirs do represent a stock of native steelhead that could be used to repopulate the entire watershed," said Hagar. But first, barriers that make the route from the ocean to the creek impassable would have to be removed so fish can return to spawn, he said.

For five years a cross-section of public agencies and environmental groups have worked to remove manmade barriers along the creek.

Their efforts have been advancing. Recently, Zone 7 Water Agency installed fish ladders along Arroyo Mocho and Arroyo Las Positas in Livermore. And the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, which owns 37,000 acres in the watershed, plans to remove the Niles and Sunol dams, said planning director Michael Carlin.