

Alameda Creek watershed to get habitat conservation plan

Goal is to protect land basin with diverse wildlife

July 9, 2004

by Stephanie Ericson

Those developing a plan to protect the natural habitat of a large portion of the Alameda Creek watershed, which includes the Sunol Regional Wilderness, say they want to get the public involved early in the game to protect what they say is an important Bay Area natural resource.

At a public meeting recently in Dublin, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission heard suggestions and answered questions on its working draft of its Habitat Conservation Plan for the 37,000 acres of land that it owns south of Pleasanton and east of Fremont. The area under study also includes 11,000 additional acres of neighboring landowners that SFPUC hopes to work with on conservation measures.

The watershed, essentially a land basin, has an existing rich habitat and diverse wildlife, likely to include many species that are disappearing in the Bay area, such as the Alameda whipsnake, red-legged frog, golden and bald eagles, and burrowing owls. The study area is 97 percent natural land cover.

"That's pretty phenomenal," commented environmental consultant Jim Robbins. "It shows good stewardship as well as lots of opportunities for conservation in the future." The plan could also include public trail expansion.

In contrast to many similar plans elsewhere, where the public makes comments on a final draft, SFPUC officials said they wanted get the public involved earlier in the process by giving them an opportunity to preview and comment on the document in progress. This meeting was the second of four planned by the commission, all held at the Dublin Public Library.

"All input is getting robust discussion," said public affairs consultant Terry Watt. In addition to the public meetings, SFPUC is planning two tours of the watershed for interested members of the public in July.

Cheryl Davis, SFPUC Acting General Manager for Operations, praised the comments from members of the approximately 20 people who attended the meeting, covering topics ranging from the Calaveras Dam, roads, bridges and trails to what species will be studied and covered by the plan.

"I feel that this interaction is like a peer review because of the sophistication of this audience," she said.

The Habitat Conservation Plan is part of the SFPUC's overall management plan for the Alameda Creek watershed adopted in 2000. Its goal is to minimize impacts of SFPUC's ongoing operations in the watershed over the next 30 years, which provides drinking water for 2.4 million people in the Bay Area, and even to enhance the area's natural habitat.

Habitat conservation plans were first introduced in 1982 through an act of Congress as a way to protect endangered or threatened species, but were not widely used until the last decade. They are required for what is called an "incidental take permit," which covers non-federal activities that will harm or harass these species.

From a review of 152 "special status" species, the SFPUC has so far tentatively selected 21 that are endangered, threatened or otherwise deserving concern - seven plants and 14 wildlife species, including two fish species, rainbow trout and Pacific lamprey.

"The HCP is a relatively new tool to protect endangered species in a comprehensive way," said David Zippin, another SFPUC environmental planning consultant. "It avoids the historic project-by-project approach."

Yet some activities won't be covered, SFPUC officials said, either because other permits for them are already under way or because they are too speculative to develop a mitigation plan. Including them, they said, would only slow down the HCP.

One example is the Calaveras Dam, which may undergo repair, reconstruction and expansion or outright replacement in the future. With so much present uncertainty, any future dam project will be covered through separate state and federal environmental reviews. But the SFPUC plans to include the dam evaluated at its present maximum capacity.

However, several members of the audience suggested that SFPUC also consider how the dam's present low water levels affect species and their habitat, and Davis said they would look into that as well.

Other discussion included whether bridges really needed to be widened and how to develop trails with the least impact on habitat, perhaps by routing them on existing roads that are no longer being used.

The next public meeting on the HCP will be held in late fall or early winter. The SFPUC also will hold a public workshop on road alternatives sometime in the coming months. The SFPUC hopes to complete the HCP by the end of 2005.

To learn more about the HCP visit <http://alamedahcp.sfwater.org> online. For information on the planned watershed tours and public meetings, call Joanne Wilson at the SFPUC at (650) 652-3209.