



Groups urge PUC: deflate creek plans

Alameda Creek steelhead restoration hinges on promises of water releases

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Inside Bay Area

Environmental groups are warning that plans to restore steelhead trout to Alameda Creek could end up high and dry without firm guarantees for water releases from two East Bay reservoirs.

Members of 65 environmental groups have asked the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission to commit to releasing enough water from Calaveras and San Antonio reservoirs to support runs of ocean-going steelhead by 2007.

The San Francisco PUC and other local water agencies are making progress in identifying and removing man-made barriers to fish migration in Alameda Creek and its tributaries, said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance.

As barriers such as check dams and culverts are removed, the dream of restoring historic steelhead runs moves closer to reality. That increases the urgency of getting local agencies to agree on exactly how much water will be required to sustain fish runs, Miller said.

Environmentalists also want the San Francisco PUC to cancel plans to build an inflatable dam in Alameda Creek in the Sunol Valley, 5 miles downstream from the Calaveras Reservoir.

The rubber dam would recapture water released from the reservoir for the benefit of fish, PUC spokesman Tony Winnicker said. The \$17.5 million facility would be equipped with fish ladders and would not be used when steelhead are migrating to and from the ocean, he said.

If we were going to release more water down the creek, we want to re capture as much as we can — especially when we're (primarily) releasing water to temperatures stable" for fish, Winnicker said. "The water would be used for fish and for (drinking) water supply."

Miller said that water released from Calaveras Reservoir should instead be recaptured further downstream — by the Alameda County Water District,

which serves 318,000 people in Fremont, Newark Union City. That would allow releases the reservoir to benefit fish along a longer stretch of Alameda Creek, he said.

The San Francisco PUC could enter into exchange agreement with the water disallowing it to recoup the water, Miller To settle a lawsuit by California Trout, organization pushing to restore wild to the wild, the PUC agreed to release water for fish from Calaveras dam. But the 1997 agreement was aimed at protecting existing rainbow trout in a 5mile stretch of Alameda Creek, not the more ambitious of restoring steelhead runs, Miller said.

Rainbow trout are essentially steelhead that not migrate to the ocean.

"The actual flows they agreed to are very, minimal," Miller said. "In most years, they wouldn't have to release any water in the winter."

The Alameda County Water District has launched an extensive study of how much water would needed to sustain a steelhead run in lower Alameda Creek. But the San Francisco PUC has yet to follow its lead, Miller said.

Although state and federal agencies could force local water agencies to release enough water to support steelhead runs, Miller said, the PUC seems intent on proceeding with the earlier plan that only protects rainbow trout.

"These projects kind of have a life of their own," Miller said of the rubber dam in Sunol Valley. "They are already budgeting money for it."

Winnicker said stewardship of Alameda Creek is "extremely important" to the PUC, noting that the agency plans to remove two century old barriers — the Niles and Sunol dams — from Alameda Creek next year.

"We have as much a stake in the health of Alameda Creek as anyone, and are playing a lead role in many efforts to restore and protect the creek," Winnicker said.

The PUC is conducting extensive studies on fish populations and how water releases from its reservoirs will affect them, Winnicker said.

Ironically, he said, landlocked rainbow trout behind the Calaveras dam may serve as the breeding population for steelhead restoration because the fish have been protected from interbreeding with nonnative species.

For now, the PUC has little water to spare for downstream releases because of fears the Calaveras Dam could fail in an earthquake. To protect downstream cities like Fremont from flooding in the event of an earthquake, water storage at Calaveras Reservoir was reduced in 2001 to one third of capacity.

This spring, the PUC decided against proposals to expand the reservoir by up to five times, and to instead rebuild it to its original capacity of 97,000 acre feet. After environmental studies are done, construction could be completed by 2009. The project is part of a \$4.3 billion overhaul of San Francisco's water supply system.

Environmentalists had opposed a large expansion of Calaveras Reservoir. But Miller said the Alameda Creek Alliance would be willing to consider a small increase in reservoir capacity if that would reduce the need for diversion dams in Alameda Creek.

Miller said a small increase in the reservoir's holding capacity could give the PUC enough reserves to do without the planned rubber capture dam in the Sunol Valley, and an existing diversion dam in upper Alameda Creek.