

## **Project opens door for fish**

*At-risk species may flourish in creek*

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FREMONT — Alameda Creek was once prime habitat for steelhead trout, but nowadays it's emblematic of why the fish is on the federal threatened species list.

Instinct leads adult steelhead to swim upstream and spawn, but a 9-foot cement barrier on Alameda Creek near Niles Community Park stops most of them in their path. And for those that get across and reproduce, their offspring often get trapped in quarry ponds, where they can't survive.

The creek is so inhospitable for the fish, as well as some species of salmon, that authorities sometimes have to trap them in nets and truck them past the barrier to help them spawn.

But those days may be drawing to an close.

Last summer, The Alameda County Flood Control District and the Alameda County Water District initiated a multimillion-dollar project to return steelhead and salmon to Alameda Creek by 2010.

The plan includes a fish ladder to help the adultfish get around the cement wall and a nearby inflatable dam as well as screens to prevent their offspring from being diverted into quarry ponds.

Work already has begun on one of the fish screens at a water district diversion pipeline just south of Mission Boulevard in the Niles district.

The project is the biggest steelhead restoration effort in the Bay Area and would make Alameda Creek the only viable steelhead run in the East Bay, said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance.

Restoring fish to creeks typically improves water quality, Miller added.

Steelhead and salmon live most of their adult lives in the ocean, but migrate up freshwater streams and rivers to spawn and rear their young.

Until about a half-century ago, the 633-square-mile Alameda Creek watershed supported large populations of the fish that in its youth thrives in waterways full of gravel, aquatic insects and overhanging vegetation.

But after several floods in the 1950s, Miller said, the Army Corps of Engineers built a flood control channel and several dams in the watershed.

The 9-foot concrete wall was built to stabilize nearby railroad footings, said Emmanuel Da Costa of the flood control district.

The obstacles haven't prevented the fish from trying to swim up the creek so much as they have greatly decreased their odds of succeeding.

To help the fish spawn, the flood control district started a rescue program seven years ago for steelhead and salmon trapped at the concrete wall in Niles.

A camera has been added in the area, and when authorities see a concentration of fish stuck there, they scoop up the fish in nets, load them into a mobile fish tank and truck them past the barrier.

Rescue efforts have been successful, said Da Costa, a Union City native who grew up fishing in the creek.

The proposed fish ladder is really a series of cement step pools enabling the fish to jump from pool to pool and around the concrete barrier and nearby inflatable dam.

Design work on the ladder is under way, Da Costa said, and the flood control district is applying for funding to build it.

The water district already has received a \$500,000 grant to complete the fish screen near Mission Boulevard, Miller said. The screen is designed to keep the young fish from swimming into water district pipes that divert creek water to quarry ponds.

Additional fish screens are planned for the creek, said Miller, who estimated that the entire project would cost up to \$3 million.

As the project draws to a close, the creek alliance, a 1,450-member nonprofit, plans to restore vegetation to the creek banks, Miller said.

But there still will be several dams upstream continuing to block some of the best fish habitat.

"We can't restore what was once there, but we can try to improve it the best we can," Miller said.