

Conservationists Want More Species in Watershed Plan

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By Ron McNicoll

Environmentalists concerned about the Alameda Creek watershed have submitted their views of what a habitat conservation plan (HCP) covering 36,000 acres in the Sunol Valley should address. San Francisco, which owns the land as part of its Hetch-Hetchy water project, had representatives of its public utilities commission (PUC) and planning department at the meeting, which was conducted Jan. 13 at the Dublin Civic Center.

San Francisco is in the process of modifying its water project. The city has drawn up a 30-year plan for the modifications, maintenance and operation of its facilities. They include the Calaveras and San Antonio reservoirs and their dams, and a diversion dam upstream from the adjacent Little Yosemite falls in Sunol Regional Wilderness.

Instead of preparing piecemeal environmental impact reports as various projects occur over the 30 years, the HCP will cover the entire plan. It will authorize the taking of certain endangered animal and plant species caused by operation and maintenance of the San Francisco project. It will spell out mitigation requirements for those takes.

As proposed, the HCP would list five federally listed endangered species, all familiar to people who follow species protection in the Valley. They are the callippe butterfly, Alameda whipsnake, California red-legged frog, California tiger salamander, and steelhead trout.

Other species, which are not endangered, but may be on watch lists that may indicate they are heading toward an endangered status, should be added to the HCP, said Doug Bell. He is the wildlife program manager for East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD), which operates Sunol Regional Wilderness. He noted that the area has 30 habitats that support golden eagles Bell said, in support of including the eagles on the list, "Our golden eagles are your golden eagles."

The HCP would have an effect on adjacent species, he said. In addition to including golden eagles, San Francisco should add several more species, including bald eagles, peregrine falcons, and a fish called the hard head, said Bell.

MORE NATIVE PLANTS ASKED FOR H.C.P.

San Francisco is falling short on listing enough endangered native plants, said Lech Naumovich, Eastbay conservation analyst for the California Native Plant Society.

The HCP lists five species. However, Alameda and Contra Costa counties have a combined 24 endangered native plant species, he told the San Francisco staff representatives. He said the number boils down to many times the national average for a county.

Naumovich named several species that he said should be added. Some of the area has not been explored for species very well, especially in the Santa Clara County portion, Naumovich later told the Independent. Naumovich also urged San Francisco to outline in the HCP how, as a neighbor, it will take on the approved Apperson Quarry, when that goes into operation.

DAMS HAVE IMPACT ON FISH SPECIES

Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance, which has 1700 members, said the organization has been working for 12 years on restoration of the creek environment. Miller said the HCP should include impacts of the three dams on fish species. They interrupt the whole ecosystem of the creek, he pointed out. They affect water temperature downstream, and also have an impact on necessary spawning gravel for steelhead.

Miller also wants the HCP to include the native rainbow trout population, not just steelhead. It's virtually impossible to say which fish are native rainbow trout and which are steelhead, since the only determining factor is which fish go out to sea, said Miller.

The creek alliance wants removal of the diversion dam near Little Yosemite falls, something it has called for in the past. "They ignored us before. This time, they need two federal agencies and one state agency to issue them permits that will authorize them for all of their impacts on species. The mitigation has to be significant. It has to contribute to the recovery of the species," said Miller.

Miller also commented on a herd of tule elk, which sometimes grazes on PUC land, south of the San Antonio reservoir. There is extensive cattle grazing there. That should be eliminated or reduced, he said.

PEER REVIEW OF SCIENCE IS ASKED

The issue of peer review was raised by Jessie Raeder, Bay Area organizer for the Tuolumne River Trust. The trust is one of many regional conservationist groups that work in concert in the Bay Area on water habitat issues. Raeder said that the applicant PUC is using only the science findings of its consultant. She called for a peer review by a panel of scientists that would be designated.

Extension of the commentary deadline on the scoping report was asked. Comments are due Jan. 22. Miller said the PUC still hasn't released the final analysis report, which contains the proposed conservation strategy.

Chris Kern, environmental planner for the San Francisco Planning Department, said at the meeting that his department also had not received it. Kern agreed with Miller that it is important to obtain the conservation strategy. "We are all waiting for that. At this point, it (the conservation strategy) is only hypothetical," he said.

Kern told the Independent, it is not true that there is a need for further review of the mitigation plan beyond the PUC'S consultant. The consultant is an independent entity itself, he said. Miller said that having the science in a report from only one source, the department's consultant, isn't really peer review. He agreed with Raeder that a panel of scientists should be appointed by mutual agreement.