Steelhead runs could return to Alameda Creek by 2016

By Matthew Artz
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FREMONT -- Funding is in place for the final projects needed to return steelhead trout to what was once their primary East Bay breeding ground.

Alameda Creek once again could have large numbers of trout spawning upstream as soon as 2016, water officials said, after announcing a $1.45 million state grant that will help pay for two key projects aimed at getting the fish over creek barriers and preventing them from being pulled into drinking water reservoirs.

"As an organization, we're committed to the project, and we will make funding available to get it completed," said Bob Shaver, assistant general manager of the Alameda County Water District, which has overseen the estimated $20 million effort to restore trout to Alameda Creek started in 1999.

Alameda Creek, the largest local watershed flowing into the bay, once was prime habitat for steelhead trout and, to a lesser extent, salmon, both of which live in the ocean but swim up freshwater streams to spawn.

But a series of barriers installed to collect water for underground aquifers and to protect the streambed as Fremont was developed have blocked the fish from heading upstream for about a half century.

Steelhead trout were placed on the federal threatened species list in 1997, making it illegal to catch them. The remaining fish in local waters mostly spawn in South Bay and Peninsula watersheds, said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance, which has campaigned for restoring trout runs.

During the past three years, the water district -- which serves Fremont, Newark and Union City -- has installed fish screens to keep trout from getting pulled into drinking water pools at Quarry Lakes, removed dams that blocked trout farther down stream and installed ladders to help fish get over other obstacles in the stream bed.

The latest grant money from the California Department of Fish and Game will go toward building another fish screen as well as a fish ladder over the district's lowermost rubber dam and an adjacent flood control structure that blocks the path of trout swimming upstream to spawn.

Shaver said the district soon will begin designing the ladder and should start building it in 2014.

Once that is complete, all that will be left is to build one more ladder, which is scheduled for construction in 2015, Shaver said. At that point, the trout should be able to swim from the bay to the Sunol Valley, where there are plenty of sites for spawning.

"We should see pretty quickly fish coming back," Miller said.

"If we do enough things right, our kids or grandkids will be able to fish Alameda Creek."