Steelhead revival possible in Alameda Creek, tributaries

By Matt Carter

If Man wills it, Central Coast steelhead could once again journey upstream through Fremont, Sunol, Pleasanton and Livermore to breed in their historic spawning grounds.

That's the conclusion of a soon-to-be-released study on the potential for restoring the steelhead to Alameda Creek and its tributaries.

If the study's recommendations are followed, work to get steelhead around many of the man-made barriers that keep the ocean-going trout from completing their stream-to-ocean life cycle could be completed as soon as 2003.

But first, the coalition of water agencies, environmental regulators and activists who helped prepare the study must line up the political support — and the money — to carry out its recommendations.

The idea of restoring steelhead to the Alameda Creek watershed has been kicked around for decades. Although discussions in 1989 never got beyond the planning stages, there are signs that, this time, a consensus is building that the work can
Steelhead: Directors vote to work with county

and should be done.

The Alameda County Water District's Board of Directors voted last Thursday to work with the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District on an application for up to $8 million in federal funding to begin the work.

The backbone of the work recommended, as outlined in a draft version of a study to be released next week, includes:

- Building a fish ladder in Fremont around a 13-foot-high millable capitan dam operated by the water district and an 8-foot-high road control weir that prevents erosion around a Bay Area Rapid Transit rail crossing.

- Removing the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission's 12-foot-high Sunol Dam in Niles Canyon.

- Modifying a 10-foot-high PG&E gas line crossing in Sunol Valley to improve passage in Alameda Creek up to Little Yosemite in Sunol Regional Wilderness.

- Improving passage to Arroyo Malto by building fish ladders around a weir near Stanley Boulevard and around an access road to a Lawrence Livermore Lab pumping station.

The study found that making those improvements and others could give steelhead access to 20 miles of suitable spawning grounds on public and private lands upstream of Fremont. Fish on their way to some spawning grounds would travel through Pleasanton in the Arroyo de la Laguna and Arroyo del Valle and through Livermore in the Arroyo Malto.

Steelhead might also thrive again in Sunol Creek near Sunol, where Randy Mills' family caught steelhead of the fish just yards from their home on Kilkare Road into the 1950s.

"My folks came from Oklahoma, and saw the fish when they first moved up there. They didn't know what they were," Mills recalled. "My uncle came up here (from Modesto) and said, 'My God, there's steelhead.'"

In the summertime, the creek never really dries up. The fish would get stuck in those pools of water.

Part of the study involved genetic tests of landlocked rainbow trout in the Alameda Creek watershed. The tests strongly suggested the fish are descended from steelhead trout that once made mass migrations to the ocean.

Because they are well-adapted to local conditions like water temperature, the fish could be ideal for restoration efforts, the study found.

In fact, some scientists believe they may be the source of ocean-going steelhead that have been spotted in increasing numbers at the so-called BART weir in Fremont. In many years, young trout may be able to get down to the ocean, but can't get past the weir on their way back. Conservationists have been carrying a few fish past the barrier by hand.

The Army Corps of Engineers built the weir, the first big obstacle to migratory fish on the creek, in 1972.

The federal government might provide as much as $5 million to bypass the weir and other barriers as part of a program designed to minimize the environmental impacts of corps projects built in less enlightened times. But there's only about $525 million available from that program each year, and the project must compete with others for the money.

Backers of the study say a federal designation of the Central Coast steelhead as a threatened species in 1987 boosts the chances of a program to restore the fish to Alameda Creek. And, they say, increased public interest and more opportunities to fund state and federal money for the project also improve the prospects.

Throughout the West, man-made barriers such as dams in the watersheds serve as the steelhead's "roads" are coming down, said state Department of Fish and Game steelhead specialist Dennis McEwan. Nevertheless, a 1996 study estimated there were only about 229,000 steelhead in California — probably less than half the population of 30 years ago, McEwan said.

If fish can't get around it, a 15-foot obelisk is "as much of a barrier as Shasta Dam," he said. Even smaller barriers — both natural and man-made — can be obstacles depending on stream depth.

While water agencies are supportive of plans to build fish ladders, there are worries that they eventually may be required to allow more precious water to flow to San Francisco Bay if steelhead are restored to Alameda Creek.

McEwan said it's too early in the process to speculate on whether more water might be required. But it is physical barriers, rather than water flows, that pose the biggest problems for steelhead — especially in relatively pristine watersheds like Alameda Creek, McEwan said. "We're not going to rectify all the barriers, but there are plans we can start with that will keep us busy."