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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Foundation offers funding for fish habitat projects

Migration obstacles in Alameda Creek will be removed

- Patrick Hoge, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Efforts to bring salmon and steelhead trout back to the Bay Area have received a big boost from a wildlife foundation that has given various agencies nearly $2.2 million to help restore fish habitat along Alameda Creek and other waterways in the region.

The 11 grants, which will be matched by state and local agencies, will go toward improving salmonid habitat in tributaries to the San Francisco Bay, particularly for the central coast steelhead trout, which the federal government has listed as a threatened species.

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, a nonprofit created by Congress in 1984, awarded the grants in coordination with the National Marine Fisheries Service, the state Department of Fish and Game and Caltrans, which started the Bay Area Salmonid Restoration Fund with money to offset the impact of pile-driving on salmonids in connection with seismic work on the Bay Bridge.

"This funding will result in major improvements for steelhead and salmon in several key watersheds," said Rod McInnis, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's southwest regional fisheries administrator.

The two largest awards, of $500,000 each, went to remove obstacles in the lower end of the 700-square-mile Alameda Creek watershed, into which healthy steelhead trout have repeatedly been seen trying to migrate in recent years.

"It's a first step in a whole series of fish passage projects in the lower creek that are really the key to steelhead restoration on Alameda Creek, " said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance, an advocacy group formed in 1997. Barriers in lower Alameda Creek have been the main obstacle to restoring migratory fish populations in the watershed, he said.

Steelhead and rainbow trout are virtually identical, but steelhead go to the ocean for some part of their lives.

Several other creek restoration projects also received grants, including those on Codornices Creek in Berkeley, San Anselmo Creek in Marin County, San Francisquito Creek in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, and the Stevens and Permanente Creek Watershed in Santa Clara County.

The Alameda Creek watershed offers tremendous potential as the largest bay tributary other than the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, particularly because its upper portions feature excellent spawning habitat and apparently native populations of rainbow trout, said Erik Schmidt of the National Marine Fisheries Service in Santa Rosa.

"It's a very, very large watershed," Schmidt said. "There is a high potential that it could become a very important spawning population in the San Francisco Bay."

The Alameda County Water District, which serves 323,000 people in Fremont, Newark and Union City, will use the grants to remove one of three rubber dams on the creek and to install a fish screen at the mouth of Niles Canyon to prevent juveniles swimming toward the bay from being sucked into storage basins used to recharge local groundwater. The dam, which diverts water into old quarry ponds for storage, is being replaced by a pipe.

Both projects are scheduled to be completed by the end of 2006, said Paul Piraino, the district's general manager.

In the future, the water agency and the local flood-control district plan to build a fish ladder or some other passageway past a concrete weir under a BART crossing and past two other rubber dams. The projects are estimated to cost $5 million to $8 million.

The San Francisco Public Utility Commission is also working on environmental studies to remove two small dams upstream in Niles Canyon. The projects are estimated to cost $6 million and to be completed by next summer. The East Bay Regional Park District removed two swim dams from the creek in Sunol Regional Park in 2001.

Those and other restoration projects are expected to reopen more than 15 miles of stream habitat to migrating and spawning fish.

Removing barriers to restoration

The Alameda County Water District will use $1 million in grants to remove a rubber dam and install fish screens to restore the steelhead habitat in the 700-square-mile Alameda Creek watershed. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation is giving another $1.17million to similar restoration projects in Marin, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

Sources: Alameda County Water District; Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Work Group