F O L L O W - U P

The Creek That Thinks it Can but Still Can't

Any attempt to restore natural functions or healthy steelhead habitat to a stream and watershed as large as Alameda Creek seems bound to fall short. As reported in *ESTUARY News* in September 2014 *(Alameda Work Trickles On)*, over the last couple of decades many have sought to tweak the creek's plumbing so it's better able to support fish, absorb floods, and supply water to local communities. But progress continues to be slow, not to mention frustrating for those with big plans who see little action.

March 2016 attempt to rescure steelhead in lower Alameda Creek. Photo: Alameda Creek Alliance

Upstream, the Alameda County Resource Conservation District continues to battle flood flows and erosion through Niles Canyon with rock weirs and bioengineering in Arroyo de La Laguna. Weirs installed 5-10 years ago as "band-aids" are still holding up well, according to RCD biologist Leslie Koenig, "Granted we haven't had significant storm flows but so far the projects are still going strong." Koenig also continues to chip away at a plan to prioritize areas of the stream for restoration and tie them to upstream low-impact development and stormwater retention projects in the Livermore Valley.

In the Valley, Zone 7 Water Agency recently got a $500,000 River Parkways Program grant to construct an innovative floodplain and riparian forest restoration project on Arroyo Mocho in 2018. Though other parts of the floodplain have been paved over or confined by suburban development, this reach is a rarity where a wider corridor of open space remains adjacent to a natural creek setting. The plan is to create a "floodable" park with a trail, as well as to enhance streamside shading, instream habitat complexity, and groundwater recharge. According to Zone 7's Elke Rank, the project is not "a one-and-done" solution for the Valley, but rather is one of many addressing regional flooding, stormwater, and sediment management issues.

In other areas upstream and tributary to the Alameda Creek, some improvements have been made for fish passage and steelhead habitat over the past two years. Alameda County succeeded in installing baffles in a culvert under Palomares Road along Stonybrook Creek to allow trout migration through the culvert. They also removed a boulder jam and regraded the creek channel above the culvert. This fall, they will replace a second culvert with a free-span bridge to provide fish passage. "These projects will also reduce the risk of flooding for landowners along Stonybrook Creek," says Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance.

On San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) lands in the southern watershed, the Alameda Creek Diversion Dam fish improvements project is under construction, which will result in a fish ladder and screened diversion next year.

Downstream, most of the projects to help steelhead over barriers and around dams, and to slow flows and cool water temperatures, are still inching through design, construction, and permitting processes. The Alameda County Water District recently drafted a negative environmental impact declaration for a pair of fish ladders, including an ambitious one past a rubber dam and the BART wier, as well as for a set of fish screens at the last unscreened diversion point in lower Alameda Creek. Construction of the upper and lower fish ladders is currently scheduled to begin in 2018 and 2019 respectively.

In another bottleneck area for fish on Alameda Creek in the Sunol Valley, PG&E is moving forward with a project to lower a natural gas pipeline currently protected by a concrete mat starting in the summer of 2017. Efforts here to improve fish passage are being coordinated with the SFPUC and the gravel quarry operator.

At the bottom of Alameda Creek, where a major flood control channel continues to collect sediment and require expensive dredging to maintain flood capacity, designs for a more sustainable channel are progressing. "The cost estimate came in at $70 million, which is too much for us to handle alone," says the Alameda County Flood Control District's Rohin Saleh. "We're in ongoing discussions with the US Army Corps about a joint project." The district didn't want to wait too long to get started, however. "We are in the process of going forward with the notches in our hard concrete structures in the channel, in conjunction with a little dredging, in the hopes that more flows and natural morphological processes will take over and begin to reshape the channel. If we get all our environmental clearances we hope to begin the actual construction next year"

At the mouth of Alameda Creek in the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, officials will soon release a draft EIS/EIR for the next phase of the Eden Landing area. Here a priority is to develop more exchange of water and sediment between the creek, the wetlands, and the Bay. "It is all one system, and we want to restore those connections that have been lost," says restoration director John Bourgeois.

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