

Steelhead Trout Seen in Alameda Creek

March 17, 2016

For the first time since 2008, steelhead trout have been seen in lower Alameda Creek. The identification of steelhead trout, a federally protected threatened species, was confirmed by a fisheries biologist with the East Bay Regional Park District.

Members of the Alameda Creek Alliance spotted two adult steelhead trout last week in the flood control channel, below an impassable concrete barrier across the creek in Fremont that blocks their spawning migration. Although there have been possible sightings of steelhead in lower Alameda Creek in March 2012 and April 2010, these are the first confirmed steelhead since a single pair of fish, aided upstream by volunteers, spawned in March 2008 in the Stonybrook Creek tributary in Niles Canyon.

"It's not surprising with this rain that steelhead trout are coming back into Alameda Creek, the largest local tributary to San Francisco Bay," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "This makes it more urgent to finally build the fish ladders that are planned for the flood control channel, so steelhead can migrate upstream through Niles Canyon and into suitable spawning habitat in upper Alameda Creek."

Steelhead trout and salmon were eliminated from the Alameda Creek watershed by the 1960s and 1970s due to construction of dams, water diversions, and instream barriers to migration. The Alameda Creek Alliance has been advocating the removal of dams and construction of fish ladders to allow migratory fish to reach spawning habitat in and above the Sunol Valley and Sunol Regional Park. Small runs of steelhead were documented in the lower creek from 1997-2008.

There may be an attempt by East Bay Parks staff and Alameda Creek Alliance volunteers to capture and radio-tag these steelhead and any others blocked below the BART weir, to study their migration. Under state and federal permits, 27 steelhead have been tagged in lower Alameda Creek in recent years and moved past barriers upstream into Niles Canyon. On February 18, six Pacific lamprey (native fish that resemble eels) were photographed at the BART weir.

Local, state and federal agencies have been working on multiple projects to allow fish migration, improve stream flows and restore stream and riparian habitat along Alameda Creek and its tributaries. More than 17 fish passage projects have been completed in the watershed since 2001. The Alameda County Water District and Alameda County Flood Control District are planning fish ladder projects in the flood control channel. From 2017-2020, the agencies plan to construct two fish ladders that will allow steelhead to bypass the BART weir and two inflatable rubber dams in the lower creek channel. Nine other fish passage projects are in the planning process. In 2011, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission began rebuilding the seismically-challenged Calaveras Dam in the upper Alameda Creek watershed. By the time construction is completed in 2018, the SFPUC will have constructed a fish ladder and fish screens on an associated diversion dam in upper Alameda Creek and will begin to provide enhanced stream flows below both dams for steelhead trout.