



Press Release #2

Fremont Youth Finds Imperiled Steelhead In Alameda Creek

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An eleven year old Fremont boy found a dying steelhead trout in the creek running by his house Thursday afternoon which may alter the fortunes of fish attempting to ascend Alameda Creek to spawn. Robin Benavidez spotted the 23 inch, four pound steelhead stranded in a drying puddle of water in the flood control channel in Alameda Creek. "The steelhead was in pretty bad shape" said Mike Forney, a neighbor on the creek, and a member of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "It was in shallow water with the dorsal fin and half of its back exposed." An attempt was made to rescue the fish by putting it in a trash can full of river water, but the fish died. A fisheries biologist confirmed that the fish was an adult steelhead, recently listed as a federally threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The documentation of the fish attempting to return to spawn in ancestral habitat further upstream may eventually involve the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the federal agency responsible for listing of threatened and endangered marine species, in the management of the creek. NMFS rules and regulations on steelhead and critical habitat designations are expected to be published in late February of 1998.

Alameda Creek drains a 700 square mile area, containing prime stream spawning habitat in Niles Canyon and Sunol and Ohlone Regional Wildernesses, east of Fremont. Steelhead, King and Coho Salmon once ran in large numbers up Alameda and other Bay Area creeks. Urbanization, and the accompanying dam building and water projects, along with misguided flood control channelization of streams and water diversions virtually

destroyed these runs.

"This fish is a special find." said Jeff Miller, spokesperson for the Alameda Creek Alliance, a local group working to restore anadromous fish runs on the creek. "We've known that salmon and steelhead have been trying to spawn in Alameda Creek and have been monitoring the channel attempting to document them." Steelhead and salmon have been spotted in the creek in recent years by East Bay Regional Park employees and local fishermen, but Thursday's fish was the second this year to have its photograph taken for evidence and a fin clipped for genetic tests, joining a 20 pound salmon found in the creek on November 28th. Further examination of the creek in the area on Thursday revealed a large half-eaten male King Salmon. Alliance members suspect that the steelhead may prove to be the offspring of a healthy population of resident rainbow trout living in upper Alameda Creek near Sunol Regional Wilderness, descendants of the original steelhead run on the creek. King, or Chinook salmon are another species of ocean-going fish which have recently attempted to reintroduce themselves to the creek. After attending an Alliance meeting, Fremont resident Ken Elliot went down to the creek the day after Thanksgiving to check for fish. What he saw was a 20-25 pound, nearly 3 foot long King Salmon attempting to climb a concrete weir in the channel below the B.A.R.T. tracks. By the time he returned with his camera, the water flow had been cut off and the fish lay dead on dry concrete.

Last winter's heavy rains brought salmon in numbers not seen in several decades to spawn in South Bay streams, including over a thousand Kings in Guadalupe River, through downtown San Jose. In the fall of 1996, 25 King Salmon were rescued from a drying pool of water in Alameda Creek and moved up into Niles Canyon. The fish were trapped below the same concrete weir, owned by the Alameda County Flood Control District/ Department of Public Works (DPW).

The Alameda County Water District operates three inflatable rubber dams in the channel which are used to divert water into gravel pits to recharge ground water supplies. When the dams are inflated, the water flow in the creek is cut off, often leaving salmon or steelhead in the channel high and dry below the DPW weir. The San Francisco Water Department controls much of the water flow on the main branch of Alameda Creek in the Sunol valley, through operation of Calaveras and San Antonio dams. The California Department of Water Resources operates Del Valle dam near Pleasanton, and along with Zone 7 Water District, controls flows in the Arroyo de la Laguna portion of the creek. For the steelhead to survive, they not only need access to spawning grounds, but also require adequate stream flows through late spring to ensure that the juvenile fish survive to make their way back to the bay as "smolts" 1 to 2 years later.

In the 1970s the State Department of Water Resources proposed Alameda Creek as the top candidate in the state for urban creek restoration. In 1989, a community group called friends of Alameda Creek attempted to restore fish runs, prompting eight public agencies to publish a feasibility and cost analysis study of restoring steelhead to the creek. Due to opposition from the water agencies, no action was taken.

"So many things have been done to this creek that have been disastrous for the fish" said Miller, "and still they are trying to return. Now is the opportunity to do something right." The Alliance is hoping the water districts will work with them to come up with a restoration solution. They have already met once with DPW to discuss building a fish ladder in the weir. "The Endangered Species Act, state laws and the doctrine of public trust require that these public agencies consider the needs of fish and wildlife when managing public resources." said Miller. "We feel that the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) dropped the ball in the 1950's when they decided that steelhead runs on this creek were no longer viable. We have met with DFG and would like to see them step in and take the lead in this effort." California Department of Fish and Game Code 5937 (a state law) mandates that dam owners must pass sufficient water over dams to maintain in good condition fish populations downstream, and was a basis for the recent Mono Lake decisions requiring the City of Los Angeles to restore flows to tributaries of Mono Lake for fish. " Each of these fish has made an incredible journey to return to this creek to spawn. Until issues of water flow and obstacles to migration are resolved, we need an interim solution to move stranded fish over the dams, so we don't have to do it ourselves. Who can sit and watch an endangered species expire right in their backyard without stepping in to help?" said Miller.

The next meeting of the Alameda Creek Alliance is Tuesday, January 6th, 7-9 PM at the Centerville Public Library in Fremont, 3101 Nicolet Ave.

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