

Spawning Steelhead Found In Old Alameda Creek Channel



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Employees of Alameda County's Clean Water Program spotted two threatened steelhead trout spawning in a tributary to Old Alameda Creek on Tuesday. Steelhead, an ocean-going variety of rainbow trout, were listed as a federally threatened species last August. The 21-inch long male and female fish were seen courting and spawning in a shallow section of concrete-lined flood control channel in Hayward. The channel flows to the bay through the historic Alameda Creek channel, two miles north of the reconfigured Alameda Creek flood control channel in Fremont. Local environmentalists and fishermen, organized as the Alameda Creek Alliance, have been fighting to restore steelhead and salmon runs to Alameda Creek.

The two silvery fish were measured and photographed, and had fin clips taken by a local fisheries biologist, who confirmed that they were wild steelhead, before releasing them back into the creek. Unfortunately, the tributary the fish were in was judged to be unsuitable habitat for the eggs to successfully hatch. This was evident not only from the garbage and refuse dumped in the creek, but also due to the channel being lined with concrete, loaded with silt, and devoid of any vegetation to shade the creek to keep water at suitable temperatures. "This scenario sort of sums up the problems with our urban creeks, but those fish also represent their amazing potential." said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance.

Richard Wetzig, Water Resources Staff member for the County Clean Water Program, said "The fish were over a gravel bar in about 8 inches of fairly fast moving, clear water. They appeared to be attempting to spawn, having dug several redds and were turning in a manner characteristic of fish behavior during spawning. The female appeared to be adjusting the size of the redds, trying to deepen them, but was stopped by the concrete

bottom. This is an amazing sight. These fish are one of the compelling reasons to work for cleaner water."

Steelhead, unlike other Pacific salmon, do not necessarily die after spawning, and can return to the sea, surviving to potentially spawn again. "The fish were in really good shape" said Manny Da Costa, also with the Clean Water Program. "It would be nice to see them be able to get up the main channel of Alameda Creek, where they could do their thing in some real gravel beds."

Genetic tests from the fin clips, along with another taken from a steelhead found dying in Alameda Creek in December, may confirm hopes that these fish are natives returning to their ancestral streams. "The importance of these fish," said Miller "is that they are the progenitors of restored fish runs on south bay creeks. We are determined to get them access to the prime habitat in and above Niles Canyon." The Alameda Creek Alliance has been meeting with the Alameda County Flood Control District (ACFCD) to find a solution for the fish barrier in the creek channel below the B.A.R.T. tracks in Fremont. The Alliance has interested ACFCD in a fish ladder for the concrete structure (the DPW weir). Engineers and hydrologists from the National Marine Fisheries Service and the state Department of Fish and Game will be visiting the creek this month to try to come up with a workable design for the ladder. "Right now we're talking about the permitting process and funding for the fish ladder. By this time next year, I hope we'll be talking about construction timetables." said Miller.

The Alliance has also obtained agreements from the Alameda County Water District (ACWD) on an interim solution to help keep alive any fish which may become trapped in the channel below the DPW weir before a fish ladder is installed. ACWD has also committed to accommodate fish migration up and down the creek once sufficient water is obtained to ensure that juvenile fish can migrate out to the bay in the spring. (See attached letter from ACWD). ACWD operates three inflatable rubber dams in the creek channel in Fremont, operation of which has left fish high and dry in the de-watered channel during attempted spawning runs.

"The response to this restoration effort has been encouraging. People are starting to get excited about what their local creeks have to offer. It's a good time to be a fish in Fremont." said Miller.

The next meeting of the Alameda Creek Alliance is 7PM, Tuesday March 24th, at the Centerville Public Library in Fremont, 3101 Nicolet Ave.

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