STEELHEAD BACK IN ALAMEDA CREEK

WATER AGENCIES PURSUING FISH PASSAGE PROJECTS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Fremont, CA - Three more steelhead trout were spotted in lower Alameda Creek this morning by Alameda County Water District employees. Two of the threatened fish were seen on February 23, blocked from upstream migration by a barrier at the BART tracks in Fremont. An unsuccessful attempt was made to capture the two fish spotted on the 23rd, to move them upstream to suitable spawning habitat. **An attempt will be made to move today's fish around 11:00 AM or noon.**

Native steelhead are returning to the creek in increasing numbers, as four public agencies are pursuing planning for fish passage projects involving either dam removal or construction of fish ladders past barriers in the lower creek. Fish ladder construction and dam removal projects in the flood control channel and Niles Canyon are scheduled to be completed by 2003/2004, allowing ocean-run steelhead trout to access the upper creek in Sunol Wilderness for the first time since the 1950's.

The Alameda County Flood Control District (ACFCD) and the Alameda County Water District (ACWD) have submitted a restoration proposal to the Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) for fish passage improvements in the lower 12 miles of creek comprising the flood control channel. The Corps is currently preparing a Preliminary Restoration Plan for the project. The proposed project includes construction of one fish ladder bypassing the BART weir (owned by ACFCD) and the middle ACWD inflatable rubber dam; another fish ladder at the upper ACWD rubber dam; and installation of fish screens at several major ACWD water diversions (where water is diverted out of the flood control channel into the Fremont Quarry Lakes for groundwater recharge).

If approved, the Corps will provide 75% funding for the project, which will be completed by fall of 2003 at the earliest. ACWD will pursue separate funding for improving fish passage at the lower rubber dam and for screening their smaller diversions.

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) is moving forward with plans to remove the Niles and Sunol Dams in Niles Canyon. Niles Dam has a non-functional fish ladder, and the fish ladder on Sunol Dam was blown out long ago. Neither dam is currently used for water supply. SFPUC has completed a feasibility study and analysis of the impacts of dam removal. The major issues studied for removing these dams were what to do with sediment accumulated behind the dams, whether riparian vegetation would be harmed by hydrologic changes after dam removal, and the historic significance of the dams.

The effects of removing Niles Dam on riparian vegetation and sediment transport are expected to be minor. It is tentatively proposed to excavate and truck out the majority of sediment accumulated behind Sunol Dam, rather than to let it flush out of the system after dam removal. The Sunol Dam removal is expected to lower the groundwater table in the area adjacent to the dam, but to not significantly impact the mature riparian vegetation along the east bank.

The East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) will begin the first Alameda Creek dam removal project on August 17, 2001, at 10 AM in Sunol Regional Wilderness. EBRPD will begin removing two low swim dams in Alameda Creek which are barriers to fish movement at lower flows. The 3 foot high dams will be removed and the streambanks restored and re-vegetated by the end of summer 2001.

ACFCD is finishing up a fish passage study for 11 County-owned culverts in Stonybrook Creek, a tributary to Alameda Creek in Niles Canyon. A radio tagged steelhead went up this creek in 1998, and there is a healthy population of native trout. All of the road crossing culverts are potential barriers to fish migration. The ACFCD and CalTrans will be looking into modifying these culverts, which could open up 2 miles of trout spawning and rearing habitat in Stonybrook Creek.

ACFCD is investigating Corps funding for a restoration project at the mouth of Alameda Creek. ACFCD is interested in removing or setting back the levees which contain the mouth of the creek, to facilitate sediment transport into the Bay. This project could alleviate the need for ACFCD to dredge the lower creek channel, while re-creating wetlands and providing nursery and smolt habitat at the creek mouth for steelhead.

The Alameda Creek Fisheries Workgroup has recommended jump-starting the steelhead run before barriers are removed in the creek. The idea is to restock native steelhead smolts (young steelhead moving downstream in preparation for the ocean phase of their life-cycle) in the lower creek for several years. It would take 1-3 years for the smolts to return from the ocean as steelhead, at which time these fish would be able to migrate upstream into the newly-opened spawning habitat.

Landlocked trout behind Calaveras and San Antonio Dams still exhibit the migratory behavior of steelhead. These fish are thought to be the purest strain of Alameda Creek-adapted fish, and most likely to respond to restoration efforts. The SFPUC will conduct a genetic study of rainbow/steelhead trout behind these dams and in upper Arroyo Mocho to determine a population suitable for jump-starting a run in the lower creek.