SAN FRANCISCO REBUKED OVER STEELHEAD TROUT CONSIDERATION FOR CALAVERAS DAM REBUILD

National Fisheries Service Will Require Consultation on Impacts to Steelhead for Federal Permit

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Sunol, CA – The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) announced this month that consultation under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) will be required for a federal permit sought by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) to rebuild the seismically challenged Calaveras Dam in upper Alameda Creek. In an April 4 letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, NMFS (the federal agency responsible for marine species listed under the ESA) rejected the SFPUC's contention and the Corps' determination that the Calaveras Dam project will have no impact on steelhead trout.

"The National Marine Fisheries Service has rightly determined that the Calaveras Dam project has potential impacts to restoration of steelhead trout in Alameda Creek that must be addressed before a federal permit is issued," said Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "We support San Francisco making needed retrofits to its water system; however SFPUC dams currently operate in violation of state wildlife protection laws, and to rebuild a major dam without a commitment to provide adequate water releases to allow restoration of steelhead trout to downstream habitat in Alameda Creek is unacceptable."

In June 2007 the San Francisco Planning Department released a Draft Program Environmental Impact Report (DPEIR) for the SFPUC's Water System Improvement Program (WSIP), a $4.3 billion S.F. water system upgrade plan through the year 2030. Formal comments submitted by the Alameda Creek Alliance, California Department of Fish and Game and Alameda County Water District noted the inadequacy of the DPEIR in addressing potential impacts to steelhead trout. The Alameda Creek Alliance is insisting that water system infrastructure in the Sunol Valley (including Calaveras Dam and Reservoir, Alameda Diversion Dam, and San Antonio Reservoir) be operated to allow steelhead trout to thrive in Alameda Creek.

The DPEIR failed to address impacts of WSIP projects on migratory fish in Alameda Creek, dismissing the planned restoration of steelhead trout to Alameda Creek as "speculative," even though steelhead trout may have access to upper Alameda Creek as early as 2010 or 2011, during construction of the dam. The proposed Calaveras Dam and Alameda Creek Fishery "Enhancement" projects also include provisions that could allow the SFPUC to divert additional stream flow from Alameda Creek, which would impact native fish and other aquatic wildlife in Alameda Creek. The SFPUC already diverts 86 percent of the stream flows of the upper Alameda Creek watershed and operates Calaveras and San Antonio Reservoirs with no minimum bypass flows to keep native fish downstream in good condition. The WSIP contemplates diverting almost all of the winter and spring stream flows from upper Alameda Creek at the Alameda Diversion Dam.

The Calaveras Dam project requires a federal permit from the Corps under section 404 of the Clean Water Act, and at issue is whether consultation is required under section 7 of the ESA for impacts to listed species.

In February 2008, the Corps, at the urging of the SFPUC, made a determination that the Calaveras project would have "no effect" on steelhead trout, which are listed as a threatened species under the ESA. In its letter, NMFS noted that Alameda Creek "could play a key role in the recovery" of the Central California Coast steelhead trout population, and that the SFPUC's proposed consideration of steelhead trout in a future Alameda Watershed Habitat Conservation Plan cannot be relied upon to address all steelhead issues.

"The SFPUC's failure to include Alameda Creek stream restoration as part of a project to rebuild the seismically vulnerable Calaveras Dam and controversial SFPUC proposals to divert even more water from Alameda Creek could unnecessarily jeopardize the schedule for water system upgrades," said Miller.

Seventeen public agencies and nonprofits, including the SFPUC, signed an agreement in 2006 to study the stream flows and fish habitat needed for Alameda Creek steelhead restoration. In 2006 the SFPUC adopted the Water Enterprise Environmental Stewardship Policy, which states: "it is the policy of the SFPUC to operate the SFPUC water system in a manner that protects and restores native fish and wildlife downstream of SFPUC dams and water diversions, within SFPUC reservoirs, and on SFPUC watershed lands."

The SFPUC manages 36,800 acres of public land and operates three dams in the upper Alameda Creek watershed. Calaveras Dam and Reservoir, completed in 1925, captures runoff from 100 square miles of the Calaveras Creek and Arroyo Hondo watersheds. The Alameda Diversion Dam also diverts winter flows from upper Alameda Creek into Calaveras Reservoir. Completion of the Calaveras Dam trapped formerly ocean-run steelhead trout above the reservoir and blocked fish migration from S.F. Bay into the best trout spawning and rearing habitat in the watershed. An estimated adult population of 300 or more landlocked steelhead/rainbow trout survives in Calaveras Reservoir and spawns in the Arroyo Hondo tributary. The SFPUC does not release water from either dam to benefit fish and wildlife downstream, and low summer flows and high water temperatures have reduced native trout to remnant populations below the dam.

Because the dam is near an active fault zone and was determined to be vulnerable in a strong earthquake, the state Division of Safety of Dams in 2001 restricted reservoir storage level to 40 percent of capacity until the dam is rebuilt. The SFPUC has proposed a replacement earthen dam immediately downstream of the existing dam, scheduled to be completed by 2012.

In 2005 the Alameda Creek Alliance and 68 other Bay Area conservation groups requested that the SFPUC improve stewardship of local watershed lands and restore water flow in Alameda Creek. The groups asked the SFPUC to abide by state Fish and Game Codes requiring sufficient instream flows to sustain native fish in good condition. The SFPUC signed an agreement in 1997 to release minimal flows from Calaveras Reservoir to restore five miles of Alameda Creek in the Sunol Valley, but to date has not released any of this water.

Since steelhead trout in the Bay Area were listed as threatened under the ESA in 1997, the Alameda Creek Alliance has been advocating for restoration projects to allow migratory fish from the Bay to reach spawning habitat in upper Alameda Creek. Adult steelhead attempting to migrate upstream have been documented every winter the past decade in lower Alameda Creek, blocked by barriers in the lower creek. Fifteen local, state, and federal agencies are cooperating on fish passage projects in the watershed, including dam removals and construction of fish ladders and fish screens. Planned restoration projects will allow adult steelhead to access up to 20 miles of spawning and rearing habitat in the creek for the first time in over half a century.

The Alameda County Flood Control District and Alameda County Water District (ACWD) in signed an agreement in 2007 to design a fish ladder that will allow steelhead to bypass a cement barrier known as the

BART weir and an adjacent inflatable water supply dam in the lower Alameda Creek flood control channel, the main barriers to fish migration into Alameda Creek. The agencies announced a goal of completing construction by 2010. ACWD recently installed fish screens on their water diversion structures in lower Alameda Creek and is preparing to remove a diversion dam this summer. The SFPUC removed two dams from the Niles Canyon reach of Alameda Creek in 2006.

The Alameda Creek Alliance (www.alamedacreek.org) is a community watershed group with over 1,500 members, dedicated to protection and restoration of the natural ecosystems of the Alameda Creek watershed.