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FISH TO GET HELP FROM REMOVAL OF DAMS

OFFICIALS HOPE ALAMEDA CREEK WILL SEE THE RETURN OF MIGRATING STEELHEAD TROUT AND BETTER HABITAT FOR OTHER LIFE ALONG ITS BANKS

Bonita Brewer

SUNOL A series of dams along Alameda Creek will be modified or removed to help future runs of steelhead trout survive, two agencies said Monday.

Two of the dams are within the Sunol Regional Wilderness and were built by the East Bay Regional Park District in the 1970s to create swimming holes for public use. Those dams will be removed, both to eliminate public-safety hazards and to create a more suitable habitat for trout and other creek life, park district officials said.

The other two dams, in Niles Canyon below the town of Sunol, are non-functioning and will be either removed or modified by the San Francisco Water Department to help steelhead migrate upstream.

"These dams are no longer needed for water delivery, and are barriers to the restoration of a steelhead run on Alameda Creek," said Larry Klein, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission's acting general manager for operations.

"We have been given the green light by our commission to do the necessary work required for modification or removal," Klein said. "The next steps are to complete planning, find funding and begin the environmental review process."

The plans respond to a National Marine Fisheries Services action listing steelhead as a threatened species. The trout migrate from the ocean up into fresh-water streams to spawn. Other barriers to fish migration still must be removed for the fish to make it into Niles Canyon, but Klein said the water department wants to help the fish get further upstream once they get into the canyon.

The 12-foot Sunol Dam, located in Niles Canyon just downstream of the town of Sunol, was built in 1901 by the Spring Valley Water Co. Now decommissioned, it once helped supply water from Alameda Creek to San Francisco and much of the Bay Area.

The four-foot Niles Dam, built in 1886, is farther downstream from Sunol.

The public has until March 29 to provide written comment on the park district's environmental study of the Sunol Regional Wilderness plan, which also calls for restoring stream banks near the dams to a more natural state.

Even without full restoration of a steelhead run, "It will be enhancing the habitat that exists, and the native trout should become more populated," said park district fisheries biologist Pete Alexander.

District spokesman Ned MacKay said everything from the California red-legged frog and the Sacramento squawfish to various types of snakes would benefit.

"That area of Alameda Creek is one of the most natural assemblages of fish and amphibians in the entire East Bay," MacKay said. "It's a relatively unspoiled stretch of creek."

He said one of the dams has become so silted that it no longer functions as a dam, and the other has raised some public-safety concerns.

In April 1999, a 7-year-old Livermore boy nearly drowned after apparently becoming trapped in some churning water behind the low-lying dam. Although the youth did not suffer permanent injury, MacKay said the incident increased the impetus to remove the dam.

"That was certainly a catalyst to get the project done, although it was not the main reason," he said.

Water department officials said there have been some accidents at the Niles Canyon dam sites over the years, but declined further comment.

One steelhead restoration study estimated costs of removing or modifying the Sunol Dam at $1.3 million.

The park's district plan to remove the Sunol Regional Wilderness dams will cost an estimated $100,000, and the district has begun to receive private donations and to apply for various grants.

Photo: Ned Mackay, East Bay Regional Parks District public information officer, stands by one of the dams on Alameda Creek slated for removal to make upstream migration easier for steelhead trout. (Jim Ketsdever/Times)

Breakout: Locator map showing removed or modified dams that steelhead trout can migrate from the ocean to spawn in Alameda County's freshwater streams. (Source: Alameda Creek Alliance, San Francisco Water Department, Alameda County Water District