

Salmon Spotted in California Creek for the First Time in Decades: Here's Why the Fish Are Back

This is the first time salmon have voluntarily used the watershed since the 1950s

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NEED TO KNOW

- Chinook salmon have been spotted in upper Alameda Creek in California for the first time since the 1950s
- The sighting occurred after CalTrout and PG&E removed the final fish-passage barrier in the area
- The barrier removal project reconnects 20+ miles of stream and restores historic migration routes

Chinook salmon have been spotted in an upper stretch of Alameda Creek, the largest local tributary to San Francisco Bay, for the first time in roughly 70 years after a major restoration effort removed the final unnatural barrier blocking their migration.

According to a press release from California Trout (CalTrout) obtained by PEOPLE, the conservation organization, in partnership with Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), completed construction on a multi-year project to restore the fish passage along the mainstem of the creek. The work reconnected more than 20 miles of stream, including a critical spawning habitat that had been inaccessible to salmon and steelhead for generations.

By Wednesday, Nov. 19, the results of the completed project were visible. According to CalTrout, biologists with Sequoia Ecological Consulting observed two Chinook salmon, each measuring 12 to 24 inches, just upstream of the former barrier site. "Based on best available records, this is the first time salmon have volitionally accessed this part of the watershed since the 1950s," the release noted.

"We just wrapped up construction, and the fish are already finding their way home!" said Claire Buchanan, CalTrout's central California regional director. "It's incredibly gratifying to see these incredible species reclaim crucial habitat that they have been locked out of for decades."

She added that the milestone follows "decades of advocacy and planning by the Alameda Creek Alliance, PG&E, Applied River Sciences, SFPUC, and others."

PG&E installed the removed barrier for a gas pipeline in Sunol Valley. The barrier occurred after the line was covered with a protective concrete erosion-control mat that extended into the creek, preventing fish passage except during especially wet winters. As drought cycles intensified across California, state and regional agencies identified the structure as the last major block to migration.

To address this, PG&E relocated the pipeline approximately 100 feet downstream and buried it approximately 20 feet beneath the creekbed. This action allowed crews to remove the mat, regrade the channel, and replant the site with native vegetation.

"We're so excited to play a part in the historic return of steelhead trout and Chinook salmon to Sunol Valley," stated Kevin Armato, PG&E vice president of gas construction. "Being good stewards of the environment is one of our priorities as a company, and witnessing that stewardship pay dividends in a local ecosystem is incredibly gratifying."

The restoration builds on more than two decades of work by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, which removed the Sunol and Niles dams in 2006 and completed a fish ladder at the Alameda Creek Diversion Dam in 2018. Continued ladder construction by other agencies in 2022 and 2023 helped reopen migration routes through Fremont and Niles Canyon.

"Because of these collective efforts, we are starting to see substantial increases in fish moving upstream and downstream within the watershed," said SFPUC General Manager Dennis Herrera. "This is a proud moment for all of us."