Salmon returning to Bay Area creek for first time in 70 years could be sign of environmental renewal to come

The 20-year effort to bring the fish back to Alameda Creek has finally paid off

A chinook salmon is spotted at the Niles Staging Area shortly after the last rain fall in November in Alameda Creek in Fremont. For the first time in 70 years, adult Chinook salmon have been documented swimming the 86-vertical-feet needed to return to Alameda Creek in lower Niles Canyon. (Photo by Dan Sarka/Alameda Creek Alliance)

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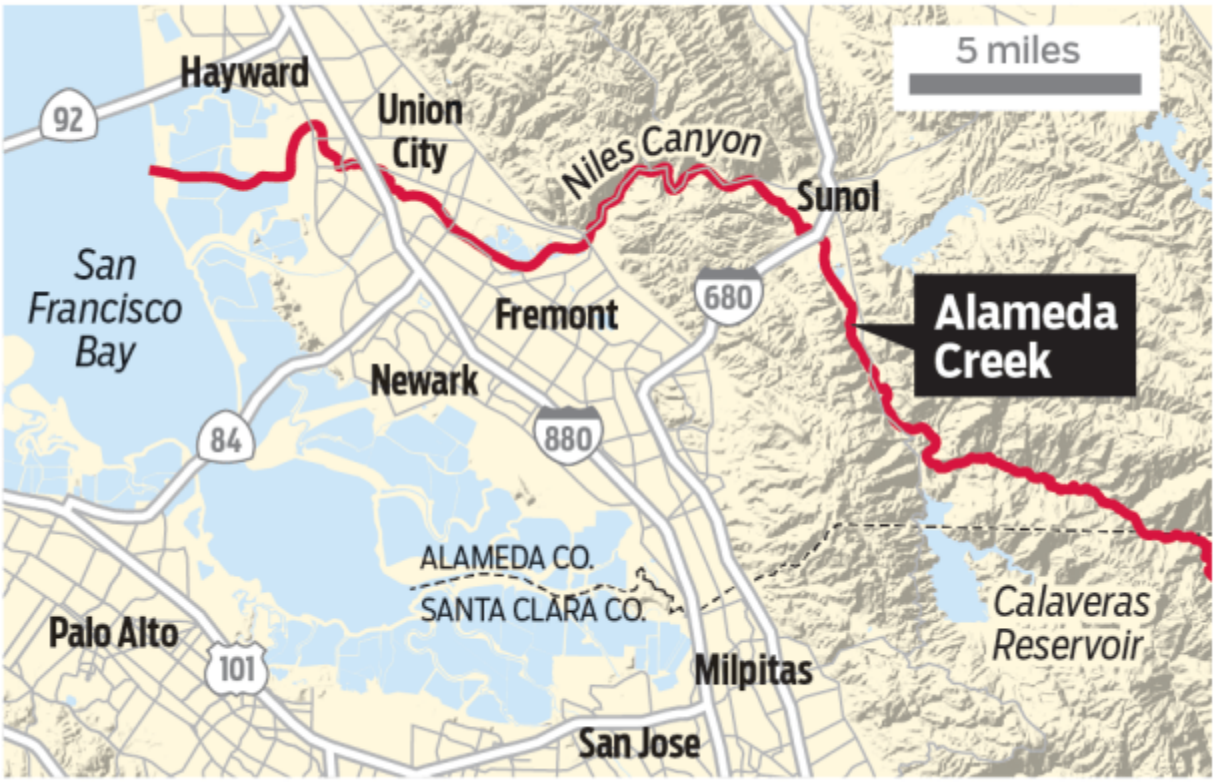
SUNOL – For the first time in 70 years, adult Chinook salmon have been spotted swimming the 86 vertical feet needed to return to Alameda Creek in lower Niles Canyon – and it could be a turning point in the decades-long effort to restore the East Bay's watersheds.



Chinook salmon, along with the endangered steelhead trout, are considered indicator species for the environment, suggesting that other animals such as otters, eagles, beavers and bears may also return to the Sunol Valley region, which increases the diversity and resiliency of its "food web," a term for interconnected food chains.

Since the beginning of November, volunteers from the nonprofit group Alameda Creek Alliance — which has worked to remove dams and install fish ladders since 1997 — have recorded nearly a dozen specimens of Chinook Salmon. These sightings come just weeks after PG&E and the nonprofit CalTrout finished a $15 million project to remove a gas pipeline that was the last barrier impeding fish migration upstream. The latest salmon run came shortly after an atmospheric river, and environmentalists are excited for what the wet season has in store.

Fish ladder along the Alameda Creek on Wednesday, Nov. 26, 2025, in Fremont, Calif. The fish passage was completed in 2022 and provides watershed access that had been totally obstructed by the BART weir. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

“It’s just the beginning o this whole migration season, so I can’t wait to see what else comes up through our project site,” said Claire Buchanan, Bay Area regional director o CalTrout.

The first intrusion into the Chinook salmon’s migration began in 1925 with the construction o the Calaveras Reservoir near Mt. Hamilton in Santa Clara County. This would be the first o three major dams that basically cut ocean-run fish rom the entire watershed, said Jeff Miller, executive director o Alameda Creek Alliance.

As human development expanded along lower Alameda Creek in Fremont, the Army Corps o Engineers constructed – or, as Miller said, “straightjacketed” – the lower creek with flood control channels. According to CalTrout, Chinook salmon haven’t been recorded in the Alameda Creek watershed since the 1950s.

“I tell people: Salmon are the soul o our rivers. Urban streams kind o lost their soul a ter so many human impacts,” said Miller.

Without access to spawning grounds, the Chinook salmon native to Alameda Creek have all been lost. So where did this latest salmon run originate?

“Historically, there were Chinook and Steelhead (trout) that reproduced and would go back to their natal spawning grounds,” Buchanan said. “But in this case, Alameda Creek has been offline for so long and fish haven’t had access, so a lot of the Chinook that we’ll see are most likely from hatcheries.”

Hatchery-raised salmon do not have an attachment to any spawning grounds and have not imprinted on a particular watershed as wild salmon do, Miller said. When those hatchlings are released into San Pablo Bay or further up the Sacramento Delta, they are effectively orphans seeking a watershed to adopt as their own. These hatchery-grown salmon have migrated up watersheds across the Bay Area, but had avoided Alameda Creek until now.

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The reintroduction of Chinook salmon to Alameda Creek is an especially hopeful sign for broader environmental restoration, said Miller. As salmon die after spawning, their decaying bodies provide nutrients to the water ecosystem and strengthen the existing food

web. Already, endangered species such as steelhead trout, Cali□ornia tiger salamanders and northwestern pond turtles have been observed around Alameda Creek.

“(Chinook salmon) are bringing their carcasses or providing □ood □or everything □rom bald eagles to river otters. I mean, we’re due to get black bears back in the Bay,” Miller said. “And then our resident bald eagle pair nesting down in lower Alameda Creek came up to the fish ladder, and we’ve seen them take both dead carcasses o□Chinook and live ones.”

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For Miller, it’s the culmination o□more than 20 years o□activism and advocacy □or a fish with one o□the most miraculous migrations in the animal kingdom. He reflected on the world o□conservation, saying, “Our losses are permanent, and our wins are usually temporary,” but the collaborative effort to bring salmon back to Alameda Creek is a reminder that major victories □or restoration are possible.

“This run o□salmon is just exhilarating,” Miller said. “People get really excited when they see these fish. It connects them to the creek, and helps them get the bigger picture o□the ecology o□the stream—how everything is connected.”