

PUC approves removal of dams to help trout

SUNOL: Commission also approves studies of water flow; hopes efforts will speed return of steelhead to watershed

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By Bonita Brewer

More hurdles in restoring steelhead trout to upper Alameda Creek and its tributaries were cleared this week, when the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission approved removal of two nonfunctioning dams in Niles Canyon below Sunol.

The late-19th Century dams are no longer needed by the water district, and pose a barrier to steelhead trying to migrate from San Francisco Bay up Alameda Creek to the Livermore-Amador Valley and to the hills upstream of Sunol.

"The removal of these dams demonstrates our commitment to restoring steelhead on the Alameda Creek, even as we work to rebuild the seismically vulnerable Calaveras Dam and provide reliable, high-quality drinking water to our 2.4 million customers," said San Francisco PUC General Manager Susan Leal in a prepared statement.

"A large portion of the creek passes through our (watershed) lands, and we have a vested interest in protecting and preserving this precious natural resource," Leal said.

The commission on Tuesday adopted findings in an environmental impact report for the dam-removal project.

Removal is scheduled to begin later this summer, following award of a construction contract and the issuance of final permits from several regulatory agencies.

Removal of the two dams are just part of a larger multi-agency plan to eliminate barriers to fish. Grants totaling \$1 million from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation have been awarded to the Alameda County Water District, which serves the Fremont area, to remove an inflatable diversion dam in Alameda Creek and to install fish screens at the district's water supply diversion point at the mouth of Niles Canyon. Another \$5 million to \$8 million is needed for fish ladders over a concrete barrier and to remove at least one other inflatable dam.

But removal of barriers isn't the only key to steelhead restoration.

On Tuesday, the San Francisco commission approved contributing \$30,000 toward a study of water flows needed in Alameda Creek and its tributaries to restore steelhead. The studies would be conducted jointly with other members of the Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup, which includes the Livermore-Amador Valley's Zone 7 Water Agency, the Alameda County Water District, the Alameda Creek Alliance and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Another \$30,000 each for the study is expected to be approved by Zone 7, the Alameda County Water District and Pacific Gas & Electric. The total \$120,000 would then be matched by the California State Coastal Conservancy.

The study will look at how much water might be needed in the creeks at critical times to support a viable steelhead population. A big question is whether municipal water supplies would be adversely affected if water agencies, including Zone 7, are required to release water from dams, or to change operations, to maintain flows for fish.

"This is something we think can be done with minimal impact to the water supply," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "It's going to be flexible. If there's drought, requirements would be different, scaled back."