Alameda Creek Alliance Celebrates Ten Years Of Fish Restoration

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by Dan Bacher

The Alameda Creek watershed, with nearly 700 square miles of watershed, is the largest watershed draining into San Francisco Bay besides the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. The creek and its tributaries, including Arroyo Del Valle and Calaveras Creek, drain a vast watershed stretching from Altamont Pass in the east to San Francisco Bay in the west and from Mount Diablo in the north to the Mount Hamilton in the south.

Although an urban river in its lower reaches, much of the land it drains in located in remote areas, including the Sunol Regional Wilderness and the rugged, forested terrain of the Mountain Hamilton Area. The river played host to runs of steelhead trout, chinook salmon and coho salmon before a series of dams, other barriers and channelization prevented the fish from getting upriver on their annual spawning journey. By the late 1950's only a remnant population of steelhead and king salmon remained in the creek below the Bart Weir, a structure that prevented any further migration upstream.

However, in 1997 the federal government listed the steelhead of the Central Coast as a threatened species and Jeff Miller, founder of the alliance, got together with anglers, conservationists and local landowners in an effort to pressure the state, federal and local governments to remove the dams and restore flows to the often dewatered stretches of stream.

"I realized that a lone hippie from Berkeley going to water district meetings wasn't going to change anything," quipped Miller at the alliance's tenth anniversary dinner at Chouinard Vineyards and Winery in the wooded hills off Palomares Road in Castro Valley. "Now after 10 years we have 1400 members and 70 conservation and fishing groups participating in our organization. We believe that the next generation has the right to see salmon spawning in Alameda Creek, as well as tule elk and bald eagles in the watershed."

During this time, the alliance, a non-profit community watershed restoration group, has worked with a consortium of 12 state, federal and local agencies to remove four obsolete dams and construct two fish ladders. One more dam

removal and construction of four additional fish ladders are in the planning stages.

“These projects will make up to 20 miles of Alameda Creek accessible to ocean-run fish for the first time in over half a century,” according to Miller.

Because of the alliance’s political pressure, two small recreational dams were removed in Sunol Park in 2001. The Niles and Sunol dams, two obsolete water supply dams built in the Nineteenth Century, were removed in 2006.

Meanwhile, the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory took out one cement crossing over Arroyo Mocho in 2004, while Zone 7 Water Agency and the Livermore Valley Joint Unified took another crossing out this August. The Water Agency also removed two drop structures replaced them with fish ladders on Arroyo Mocho.

One of the rubber inflatable dams in the flood control channel in the city of Fremont, operated by the Alameda County Water District, is funded for removal in the summer of 2008. The water district and Alameda Flood Control District also signed an agreement to build a fish ladder that provides passage over the Bart Weir and the middle rubber dam to 2010.

“One of our best moments was in 1998 when Pete Alexander, the East Bay Regional Park District Biologist, saw steelhead eggs in the lower creek,” Miller recalled. “We scooped them up and brought them to a fourth grade class to raise in aquariums. They hatched out to inch long fry. These were the first juvenile steelhead released back into the creek since 1964. Those are kids who know about the lifecycle of these fish. Hopefully, they will become movers and shakers in their community.

The alliance is trying to pressure the San Francisco Public Utility Commission to remove Alameda Diversion Dam, located upstream of Little Yosemite between Sunol Regional Wilderness and Ohlone Regional Wilderness. This diversion diverts upper Alameda Creek through a tunnel into Calaveras Reservoir. Removing this dam his would free vast areas of the upper watershed to migration by anadromous fish.

Besides removal of this dam, the Alliance is also working to get government agencies to adopt minimum flows for the creek for downstream and upstream migration and in stream rearing. The rebuilding of Calaveras Dam in conformance with modern earthquake standards gives the organization the chance to get minimum flows in the stream.

Seventeen public agencies and nonprofit organizations last October signed a formal agreement to collaborate on water flow and fish habitat studies. “These studies should identify how much water is needed, when it is needed, and in

what stream reaches," said Miller. "We believe we can provide water to restore a steelhead run without compromising water supply and in the process provide beneficial habitat for other native wildlife."

The agencies signed the Memorandum of Understanding to conduct jointly-funded studies of how much water might be needed at critical times to support a viable steelhead population- while also considering other native fish and wildlife and minimizing potential impacts to drinking water supplies. The $240,000 technical study will be conducted in two phases by McBain and Trush, independent consultants.

Contributions of $30,000 each were approved by four of the signatories – the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC), Livermore-Amador Valley's Zone 7 Water Agency, Alameda County Water District (ACWD) and Pacific Gas and Electric Company. The $120,000 provided by these four agencies will be matched by the California State Coastal Conservancy, for a total of $240,000.

Alameda Creek has tremendous potential for restoration, as dams continue to be removed and fish ladders are built, since the watershed already has good populations of wild trout, the descendents of steelhead that ascended the creek and its tributaries before all of the dams were constructed.

"We did genetic testing of the wild trout in the tributaries and the steelhead that show in the lower creek channel and they are similar, so the run could be restored with these fish once the migration barriers are removed," said Miller. "The landlocked steelhead in Calaveras and San Antonio reservoirs spawn in the creeks and produce smolts just like the ocean-going steelhead."

"Hundreds of people have participated in creek cleanups, checked fish traps, helped in fish rescue and staffed tables at events," Miller said. "Now all of these people have a stake in restoring the creek."

Speakers at the event besides Miller included State Senator Ellen Corbett, who represents the 10th District that includes much of the Alameda Creek watershed, and Dr. Andrew Gunther, Director of Center for Ecosystem Management and Restoration and Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup Facilitator, and this writer.

"The steelhead have forced people from different organizations and agencies to talk to one another," said Gunther. "Now the question is what do we mean when we want Alameda Creek restored? How many steelhead do we want to run back? How do we plan to get them to return? And where do we want them to return?

The Alliance educates the residents of Fremont, Union City, Newark, Sunol, Pleasanton, Dublin and Livermore about watershed restoration and protection of

endangered species and their habitats. The Alliance also trains volunteers for fish rescues, creek cleanups, creek monitoring, and assisting biologists in gathering scientific data essential to steelhead restoration. .

"Over the next decade we intend to make Alameda Creek one of the success stories in urban stream restoration. Our restoration project is the best of its kind in the San Francisco Bay Area now," Miller stated.

I congratulate the Alameda Creek Alliance on its tenth anniversary. They have accomplished a lot in the past 10 years, but a lot of work is still needed to bring steelhead – and eventually king and coho salmon – back to the creek. The alliance's efforts occur in the context of a statewide and nationwide movement by local grassroots people to restore fish and wildlife in urban watersheds that have been devastated by bad management by federal, state and local governments.

I urge anglers interesting in restoring this unique stream to become a member of the Alameda Creek Alliance. By joining, you will receive the newsletter Up Your Creek! as well as regular e-mail action alerts. For a donation of $25 or more, you receive a colorful ACA t-shirt. For more information, go to http://www.alamedacreek.org or call Jeff Miller, Director, Alameda Creek Alliance, (510) 499-9185.