

"STELLA THE STEELHEAD" IN STONYBROOK CREEK

THREATENED FISH CONTINUE TO RETURN TO ALAMEDA CREEK



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Fremont - Three more steelhead trout were spotted in lower Alameda Creek this week by Alameda County Water District (ACWD) employees. The steelhead were temporarily stranded in a shallow pool of water on March 20, as the water district cut water flows to repair an inflatable dam in the Alameda Creek flood control channel, in Fremont. The fish later moved downstream into deeper water as flows were restored. The raised ACWD inflatable dam prevents these fish from migrating upstream, to spawning habitat in and above Niles Canyon. These fish are blocked by the dam, downstream of where an estimated 20-50 steelhead were trapped in February, below a drop structure owned by the Alameda County Flood Control District. Steelhead trout in the central California coast are listed as a federally threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

"The water district has to commit to building fish ladders past these dams," said Jeff Miller, of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "Of the dozens of steelhead that showed up this winter, only one made it past barriers in the lower creek and has a chance to spawn - Stella the Steelhead." Stella the Steelhead was one of three fish netted by the East Bay Regional Park District and community volunteers in February, and moved over the barriers in lower Alameda Creek. Stella was fitted with a radio transmitter, and her movements have been monitored by a Park District fisheries biologist over the last month. After being released in lower Niles Canyon, Stella originally swam up Alameda Creek until she was

blocked by Sunnyside Dam at the top of the canyon. Sunnyside Dam, which is no longer in use, is owned by the San Francisco Water Department (SFWD). SFWD is currently considering removal of the antiquated structure.

The coalition of fishermen, biologists, and environmentalists in the Alameda Creek Alliance had hoped Stella would migrate up Alameda Creek into Sunol Regional Park, where there is prime spawning habitat. Instead, Stella backtracked after being blocked by Sunnyside Dam, and went up Stonybrook Creek, a very steep tributary stream to Alameda Creek in Niles Canyon. The Park District biologist tracked her by radio signal one mile up the canyon, to a pool full of native rainbow trout. If Stella finds a male trout to spawn with, this will be the first documentation of successful steelhead spawning in Alameda Creek since the 1950s, when water diversions and dams destroyed the run. Steelhead trout are the migratory, or anadromous, form of rainbow trout, and can interbreed with them, as they are genetically identical.

"Stella is Fremont's 'Humphrey the Whale', only she's not lost. She knows where she's going, she just can't get there," said Miller. "We're rooting for Stella to find a mate, and we're asking the water districts to do the right thing and make sure next year's fish can get past the dams on their own."

The three steelhead seen on Saturday are likely indicators of a larger school of fish blocked from migrating upstream. Fish biologists fear these fish may have already attempted to spawn in the flood control channel, which is not viable habitat for eggs. "There's no riparian vegetation or other cover in there, water temperatures are high, the creek gets de-watered by the Alameda County Water District; the flood control channel is not fish spawning habitat," said Gordon Becker, a local fisheries biologist. "These barriers need fish ladders so the fish can get to Sunol." Park District biologists and community volunteers will search this weekend for spawning nests, or "redds," in the area where the fish were spotted.

Over 150 steelhead eggs were rescued from the channel last year, and hatched in the classroom by students at Donlan Elementary School in Pleasanton. The juvenile fish, known as "fry," were returned by the students to Alameda Creek in Sunol Regional Park. The fry will spend 1-2 years in the stream before migrating to the ocean as "smolts". Adult steelhead, or "spawners," will return to the creek 1-3 years later. "We're hoping the fish ladders will be waiting for them," said Miller.