S.F. WATER SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT PLAN COULD DERAIL ALAMEDA CREEK STEELHEAD RESTORATION

SFPUC Jeopardizes Schedule for Water System Upgrades with Inadequate Environmental Review of Alameda Creek Projects

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Sunol, CA – The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) is dismissing consideration of the impacts of three dams on steelhead trout in Alameda Creek as part of a programmatic environmental review for retrofits to San Francisco's water system, and is proposing water supply projects in the Sunol Valley that could further harm fish and wildlife in Alameda Creek. The SFPUC's failure to include Alameda Creek stream restoration as part of a project to rebuild the seismically vulnerable Calaveras Dam and controversial SFPUC proposals to divert more water from Alameda Creek could unnecessarily jeopardize the schedule for water system upgrades.

"We support San Francisco making needed retrofits to its water system, however the new Calaveras Dam and reservoir must be operated to allow restoration of steelhead trout to Alameda Creek," said Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "SFPUC dams currently operate in violation of state wildlife protection laws, and to rebuild a major dam without providing adequate water for fish and wildlife below the dam is unacceptable."

The San Francisco Planning Department last week finished accepting public comments on the Draft Program Environmental Impact Report (DPEIR) for the SFPUC's Water System Improvement Program (WSIP), a $4.3 billion S.F. water system upgrade plan through the year 2030. Formal comments submitted by the Alameda Creek Alliance, California Department of Fish and Game and Alameda County Water District noted the inadequacy of the DPEIR in addressing potential impacts to steelhead trout. The Alameda Creek Alliance is insisting that water system infrastructure in the Sunol Valley (including Calaveras Dam and Reservoir, Alameda Diversion Dam, and San Antonio Reservoir) be operated to allow steelhead trout to thrive in Alameda Creek.

The DPEIR failed to address impacts of WSIP projects on migratory fish in Alameda Creek, dismissing the planned restoration of steelhead trout to Alameda Creek as "speculative." The proposed Calaveras Dam Replacement and Alameda Creek Fishery "Enhancement" projects include provisions that could allow the SFPUC to divert additional stream flow from Alameda Creek, which would impact native fish and other aquatic wildlife in Alameda Creek. The SFPUC already diverts 86 percent of the stream flows of the upper Alameda Creek watershed and operates Calaveras and San Antonio Reservoirs with no minimum bypass flows to keep native fish downstream in good condition. The WSIP contemplates diverting almost all of the winter and spring stream flows from upper Alameda Creek at the Alameda Diversion Dam.

Seventeen public agencies and nonprofit organizations, including the SFPUC, signed a formal agreement in October 2006 to collaborate on a study of the stream flows and fish habitat needed for Alameda Creek steelhead trout restoration. In 2006 the SFPUC adopted the Water Enterprise Environmental Stewardship Policy, which states: "it is the policy of the SFPUC to operate the SFPUC water system in a manner that protects and restores native fish and wildlife downstream of SFPUC dams and water diversions, within SFPUC reservoirs, and on SFPUC watershed lands."

“Other agencies are moving forward with fish passage projects in lower Alameda Creek that will allow steelhead trout and Chinook salmon to return to the upper watershed by 2010, before construction of Calaveras Dam is complete,” said Miller. “We are extremely disappointed that the SFPUC has not included adequate mitigations for sustaining steelhead and salmon in Alameda Creek as part of the water system upgrade.”

The SFPUC manages 36,800 acres of public land and operates three dams in the upper Alameda Creek watershed. Calaveras Dam and Reservoir, completed in 1925, captures runoff from 100 square miles of the Calaveras Creek and Arroyo Hondo watersheds. The Alameda Diversion Dam and tunnel also diverts winter flows from upper Alameda Creek into Calaveras Reservoir. Completion of the Calaveras Dam trapped formerly ocean-run steelhead trout above the reservoir and blocked fish migration from S.F. Bay into the best trout spawning and rearing habitat in the watershed. An estimated adult population of 300 or more landlocked steelhead/rainbow trout survives in Calaveras Reservoir and spawns in the Arroyo Hondo tributary. The SFPUC does not release water from either dam to benefit fish and wildlife downstream, and low summer flows and high water temperatures have reduced native trout to remnant populations below the dam.

Because the dam is near an active fault zone and was determined to be vulnerable in a strong earthquake, the state Division of Safety of Dams in 2001 restricted the reservoir storage level to 40 percent of capacity until the dam is rebuilt. The SFPUC has proposed a replacement earthen dam immediately downstream of the existing dam, with a core that could allow future enlargement of the dam. The rebuild is scheduled to be completed by 2012.

In 2005 the Alameda Creek Alliance and 68 other Bay Area conservation groups requested that the SFPUC improve stewardship of local and regional watershed lands and restore water flow in Alameda Creek. The groups asked the SFPUC to abide by state Fish and Game Codes requiring sufficient instream flows to sustain native fish in good condition. The SFPUC signed an agreement in 1997 to release minimal flows from Calaveras Reservoir to restore five miles of Alameda Creek in the Sunol Valley, but to date has not released any of this water.

Since steelhead trout in the Bay Area were listed as threatened under the ESA in 1997, the Alameda Creek Alliance has been advocating for restoration projects to allow migratory fish from the Bay to reach spawning habitat in upper Alameda Creek. Adult steelhead attempting to migrate upstream have been documented every winter the past decade in lower Alameda Creek, blocked by barriers in the lower creek. Fifteen local, state, and federal agencies are cooperating on fish passage projects in the watershed, including dam removals and construction of fish ladders and fish screens. Planned restoration projects will allow adult steelhead to access up to 20 miles of spawning and rearing habitat in the watershed for the first time in over half a century.

The Alameda County Flood Control District and Alameda County Water District (ACWD) in July signed an agreement to design a fish ladder that will allow steelhead to bypass a cement barrier known as the BART weir and an adjacent inflatable water supply dam in the lower Alameda Creek flood control channel, the main barriers to fish migration into Alameda Creek. The agencies announced their goal to have the fish ladder constructed by 2010. The SFPUC removed two dams from the Niles Canyon reach of Alameda Creek last summer and the ACWD is currently installing fish screens and preparing to remove a diversion dam from lower Alameda Creek.

The Alameda Creek Alliance (www.alamedacreek.org) is a community watershed group with over 1,450 members, dedicated to protection and restoration of the natural ecosystems of the Alameda Creek watershed.