Early Storm Brings Chinook Salmon to Alameda Creek

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Fremont, CA – High runoff from the recent storm has prompted the migration of a dozen or more adult Chinook salmon into lower Alameda Creek in Fremont. The salmon are blocked from moving upstream by a cement weir, where construction of a fish migration ladder is currently nearing completion. Chinook have not successfully spawned in Alameda Creek for more than half a century, but fish passage projects in the lower creek aimed at helping movement of threatened steelhead trout will aid salmon migration as well.

Photos and video of the chinook salmon are available for media

"We welcome the return of Chinook to the Alameda Creek watershed, where they were once a native fish," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "Unfortunately these particular salmon are a little early since the new fish ladder is not operating yet. The good news is that any salmon or steelhead trout returning next fall or winter will make it upstream to suitable spawning habitat higher in the watershed."

Stream flow in lower Alameda Creek reached nearly 7,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) on Monday after the big storm, but by Tuesday morning had dropped to 175 cfs and salmon were in a rapidly receding pool below an impassable cement drop structure. East Bay Regional Park District fisheries biologists will be on site today to assess whether these fish need to be rescued or relocated.

Just a handful of adult Chinook salmon have attempted to migrate up to Alameda Creek to spawn in recent decades. The fish are most likely strays from Central Valley fish hatcheries. However, Chinook could stray from the nearby Guadalupe River in San Jose. Chinook of hatchery origin began spawning in the 1990s in South Bay streams, where there are now small numbers of naturally reproducing fish. Chinook will likely repopulate Alameda Creek once fish passage projects are completed.

Chinook historically spawned in Alameda Creek, evidenced by ancient salmon remains found in Native American shell mounds along the creek in Fremont. Fisheries experts also report historical evidence of coho salmon in Alameda Creek, with records from the 1920s-1960s. Recent scientific studies and DNA sequencing have provided proof of historic Chinook salmon runs in Santa Clara County in the Guadalupe River. Downtown San Jose is now the southernmost major metropolitan area hosting salmon runs in the United States. A genetic analysis done on Chinook salmon sampled from recent returns to the Guadalupe River watershed revealed that the fish are closely related to Feather River Hatchery strains.

Alameda Creek is becoming an urban stream success story after decades of restoration efforts. Since steelhead trout in the Bay Area were listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 1997, a consortium of organizations and agencies has cooperated on restoration projects to allow migratory fish to reach spawning habitat in upper Alameda Creek, including dam removals and construction of fish ladders and fish screens. At least 18 fish passage projects have been completed in the watershed since 2001. Water agencies are also working on projects to improve stream flows and restore stream and riparian habitat along Alameda Creek and its tributaries. These restoration projects will make up to 20 miles of Alameda Creek and its tributaries accessible to ocean-run fish for the first time in over half a century.

The Alameda County Water District and Alameda County Flood Control District are completing a critical fish ladder that will allow steelhead and salmon to migrate past the BART weir barrier and an adjacent inflatable rubber dam used for water supply operations. The ACWD recently completed another fish ladder at a second inflatable rubber dam one mile upstream in the flood control channel.

In 2018 the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission finished rebuilding the seismically-challenged Calaveras Dam in the upper Alameda Creek watershed. The new reservoir now operates with cold water releases in the summer to help trout rear downstream of the dam. The SFPUC also built a new fish ladder and fish screens at the associated Alameda Diversion Dam in upper Alameda Creek. This diversion dam is now operated to bypass much more of the winter and spring high flows in upper Alameda Creek. The enhanced stream flows will help migratory fish get further upstream to better habitat.

Alameda Creek is considered an 'anchor watershed' for steelhead, since it has regional significance for restoration of the threatened trout to the entire Bay Area. Steelhead, salmon and lamprey are anadromous fish, living out their adult lives in the ocean and migrating up freshwater streams and rivers to spawn. Construction of dams, water diversions, modifications to the Alameda Creek streambed, and urbanization made it impossible for steelhead to migrate upstream, eliminated access to suitable spawning areas, and reduced suitable habitat for cold-water fish.

Photo by ACA member Dan Sarka

The Alameda Creek Alliance is a 2,000-member strong community watershed group, dedicated to protecting and restoring the natural ecosystems of the Alameda Creek watershed. The Alameda Creek Alliance has been working to restore steelhead trout to the Alameda Creek watershed since 1997.