FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 28, 2024

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Steelhead Trout Start Rebound in Alameda Creek

Record number of juvenile steelhead tracked heading to San Francisco Bay in 2024

FREMONT, Calif. – After more than two decades of work to restore naturally migrating steelhead trout to Alameda Creek, a coalition of public agencies and non-profit organizations are finally seeing their hard work pay off.

San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) biologists documented a record number of juvenile steelhead trout in Alameda Creek this year. Between 2015 and 2023, biologists captured and released 295 juvenile steelhead trout during their yearly fish trapping surveys, an average of about 37 a year. This year alone, they captured and released 2,588 juvenile steelhead.

SFPUC biologists placed tiny transponders in 755 of the fish caught this year before sending them on their way down the creek. More importantly, 50 of those tagged fish were detected migrating down Alameda Creek towards San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean for the first time. Scientists know this because partner agency Alameda County Water District's (ACWD) antennae at their fish ladder 12 miles downstream detected the fish passing through, much like a FasTrak works on your car. ACWD two new fish ladders are structures that allow migrating fish to avoid obstacles in Alameda Creek and pass both downstream and upstream. Below the lower fish ladder, the steelhead and other fish have an unobstructed journey to San Francisco Bay, which leads to the Pacific Ocean.

SFPUC biologist Claire Hyde carries captured steelhead from the trap to shore to take measurements and tagging. Photo courtesy of San Francisco Public Utilities Commission.

"Everyone loves a good comeback story," said SFPUC General Manager Dennis Herrera. "The hero of this tale happens to have gills. After decades, steelhead in Alameda Creek are not only thriving, they're on their way out to the bay and the ocean beyond. Our commitment to strong environmental stewardship is unwavering, and it's fantastic to see this partnership and hard work pay off. Now we're looking forward to seeing adult steelhead return up the creek in a few years to spawn. That would make quite a homecoming."

Steelhead trout were once abundant in Alameda Creek when the SFPUC's private predecessor, Spring Valley Water Company, purchased this land in the early 1900s. Over a century of development in the Bay Area created barriers to fish migration that greatly reduced those numbers.

The path for fish in Alameda Creek to reach the bay and ocean had been blocked for decades by dams and flood control infrastructure. Years of investment by the SFPUC, ACWD and others eliminated these migration barriers and opened a pathway to the watershed in 2023, when ACWD began operating its fish ladder project.

SFPUC biologist Randy Renn uses a net to gently remove steelhead from a trap in Alameda Creek to take measurements before releasing them back into the Creek.
Photo courtesy of San Francisco Public Utilities Commission.

Bellwether Species

Steelhead are a bellwether species in Alameda Creek. The restoration of a natural steelhead run will enhance the overall health of the creek and the surrounding watershed. Healthy watersheds are a boon for the environment and help provide high quality water for millions of Bay Area residents.

Steelhead trout are anadromous – they migrate up freshwater streams to spawn and can return to the ocean multiple times in their life. Their offspring rear in freshwater, then migrate to the ocean to complete their life cycle. Some never leave freshwater streams and are called rainbow trout. Adult steelhead had not been able to migrate from the bay and ocean upstream into the Alameda Creek Watershed for more than 50 years. Now they can.

The SFPUC removed the outdated Niles and Sunol dams in 2006 and completed a fish ladder over its Alameda Creek Diversion Dam in 2018. The SFPUC also began water releases out of the upgraded Calaveras Dam in 2019 to improve fish spawning and rearing habitat, including mimicking the natural flows of the creek. The major barriers to fish passage in lower Alameda Creek were removed in 2023 when ACWD began operating its largest, 625-foot-long fish ladder. The final barrier for upstream fish migration on Alameda Creek, a cement structure over a PG&E gas pipeline in the Sunol Valley, will be removed in 2025.

“The fish ladders, these complex engineering marvels, are a testament to what we can achieve when we work together. They support the natural instincts of migrating fish, demonstrating our ability to balance water supply needs and wildlife. This is a collective success we can all be proud of,” said ACWD Board President Jim Gunther.

The hero of our story – the steelhead trout.
Photo courtesy of San Francisco Public Utilities Commission.

Strong Partnership

Because the barriers to steelhead restoration are watershed-wide, addressing them requires the close work and collaboration of multiple agencies who care about the environment. For the last 25 years, the Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup – a coalition of public agencies and non-profit organizations – has

worked to eliminate fish migration barriers, providing access to and from San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean and restoring watershed habitat.

The SFPUC and ACWD are active members of the workgroup and are collaborating to monitor record numbers of steelhead trout in Alameda Creek. The rice-sized transponders that biologists placed in tagged fish can be read at multiple locations along Alameda Creek, including the ACWD's fish ladder downstream.

"It can't be overstated how significant a change has been made to Alameda Creek through restoring migratory fish passage and allowing steelhead and salmon to complete their life cycle and begin to repopulate the largest local tributary to San Francisco Bay," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "The public and agency support for this resurrection of our native fish has been monumental. Salmon are the soul of our rivers, and if we allow them to thrive these remarkable fish have the ability to teach us how to think more like a watershed."

SFPUC biologists say there may be multiple reasons for the dramatic increase in steelhead this year in Alameda Creek. These include five years of cold water releases into Alameda Creek from the new Calaveras Dam that enhance creek flows for fish spawning and rearing. The winter storms of 2023 also caused excess water to flow out of Calaveras Reservoir, which may have sent previously land-locked steelhead from the reservoir into the creek. The absence of barriers to movement within the watershed may also be a contributing factor. SFPUC and ACWD staff will continue to monitor and share their data in real time to track the movement of fish up and down the watershed. They hope to see steelhead numbers increase over time, supporting the resurgence of a native born, naturally migrating steelhead run to Alameda Creek. That would be priceless.

SFPUC biologists carefully insert a grain of rice sized transponder into the steelhead trout. Much like a FastTrak transponder, the transponder will ping antennae along the creek and alert biologists of the fish's presence. Photo courtesy of San Francisco Public Utilities Commission.

About the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission is a department of the City and County of San Francisco. It delivers drinking water to 2.7 million people in the Bay Area, collects and treats wastewater for the City and County of San Francisco, and meets over 70 percent of the electricity demand in San Francisco. The SFPUC's mission is to provide customers with high-quality, efficient, and reliable water, power, and sewer services in a manner that values environmental and community interests and sustains the resources entrusted to the agency's care. Learn more at sfpuc.org.

About the Alameda County Water District

Since 1914, the Alameda County Water District has supplied water to the residents and businesses of southern Alameda County. ACWD supplies drinking water to the 344,000 people living in the cities of Fremont, Newark, and Union City. For more information, please visit acwd.org.

About the Alameda Creek Alliance

The Alameda Creek Alliance is a nonprofit 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.