Two Dams Come Down So That Steelhead Can Come Up

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The campaign to restore Alameda Creek and its steelhead trout is benefiting from the razing of two dams, a project the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission on Thursday called the biggest dam removal in Bay Area history.

As the last pieces of Sunol and Niles dams were coming down Thursday, the PUC promised cash for the restoration effort and Pacific Gas and Electric Co. announced it would modify a pipeline impeding the creek.

Environmentalists said they are well on the way toward seeing Alameda Creek run largely unimpeded by 2011.

"This is a historic day," Jeff Miller, director of Alameda Creek Alliance, said as a backhoe scooped chunks of the dam. "Having worked on this for nine years, it is staggering to see the creek without Sunol Dam."

There is still much to be done before steelhead spawn in the far reaches of Alameda Creek, including finding some way for the fish to pass a weir in Fremont. But Miller said the dams' removal will give the restoration campaign added momentum.

The PUC and 16 other organizations -- including the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service -- agreed Thursday to work together toward the creek's restoration and finance an analysis of what must be done.

"We are putting it in writing," Susan Leal, PUC executive director, said before signing the pledge. "We will spend $240,000 to do the studies to see what it will take to bring that habitat back."

Alameda Creek and its tributaries cover 670 square miles, making it the region's third-largest watershed. Environmentalists have long argued that it is big enough and wet enough to support steelhead while ensuring adequate water supply and flood protection for a growing urban area. The PUC, which manages the Hetch Hetchy water system that serves 2.4 million customers, plays a key role in the effort because Alameda Creek is fed by the agency's Calaveras Reservoir.

It's been at least 40 years since any significant number of steelhead made their annual migration from the ocean through San Francisco Bay and up Alameda Creek to spawn. As the region grew, one barrier after another appeared on the creek.

Niles Dam was built in the 1880s. Sunol Dam went up about 20 years later. Both later became part of the PUC.

The two dams, each about 110 feet wide and 8 to 10 feet tall, became obsolete when the Hetch Hetchy system was completed in the 1930s. They remained standing simply because no one ever thought to knock them down.

That began to change about a decade ago with the campaign to restore Alameda Creek, but it still took

several years for the agencies that rely upon the creek for water or flood protection to endorse the project. Leal said the demolition reflects a "new PUC" committed to environmental stewardship.

"Our mission is to deliver water to 2.4 million customers and, where we can and how we can, restore the environment," she said.

The project cost $1.4 million and was funded through the PUC's capital improvement fund.

To further help the restoration, the PUC is installing a valve in Calaveras Dam just south of Sunol that will help ensure a steady flow of water conducive to steelhead runs, officials said. That dam, which is more than 100 years old and seismically unsafe, will be replaced by 2011, and environmentalists hope to have Alameda Creek running freely by then.

With the two dams out of the way, creek advocates are focusing now on a weir, or concrete apron, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built near Fremont to prevent channel erosion and protect an elevated BART line. Steelhead cannot continue beyond the weir, so environmentalists want a fish ladder installed so the fish can traverse it.

"That's our highest priority project," Miller said. "As soon as we can fund it, we'll do it."

Another obstacle could be eliminated soon now that PG&E has agreed to modify a 36-inch gas line that traverses Alameda Creek southeast of Sunol. The pipeline was once buried, but erosion has since exposed it. The company said moving the pipeline could cost as much as $1 million but there might be less expensive ways to make the creek passable to fish.

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