Fishy Business

Getting home is an uphill swim for local trout, even without SF's water agency and George Bush teamed up against them.

By Robert Gammon

When it comes to water, human thirst trumps the environment nearly every time, even in an environmentally conscious city like San Francisco. Just ask the generations of steelhead trout trapped for more than eighty years in East Bay reservoirs owned by the city.

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Details

Who / What:
Steelhead Trout
Alameda Creek Alliance
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Since 1997, the Alameda Creek Alliance has been working to free at least some of the fish. The main goal has been to restore the trout's 25-mile migratory path from San Francisco Bay to the oak-studded hills south of Pleasanton and Livermore. If successful, it would be the first restoration of a migratory steelhead habitat in East Bay history.

The 700-plus-member alliance has made significant progress in the past eight years. It has convinced several public agencies to either remove fish barriers in Alameda Creek or seek funding for "fish ladders" -- gradually ascending pools of water -- so trout can swim past concrete walls too expensive to remove. "When I first started this, a state Fish and Game biologist told me to give it up, and explained why it couldn't be done," alliance executive director Jeff Miller said during a recent tour of Alameda Creek. "But one by one, we've shot down all those excuses. We're at the point now that I'm confident we're going to solve all of our major fish barrier problems -- except for the dams."

The dams are Calaveras and San Antonio, both in southeastern Alameda County. The most significant for environmentalists is Calaveras, which sits 772 feet above sea level in the hills next to Sunol Regional Wilderness. Calaveras Dam is seismically unsafe, and its owner, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, plans to replace it. Environmentalists want the commission to create a trout passageway to and from the reservoir as part of its new $246 million dam project.

But the commission has balked at the request. It also has repeatedly flouted a 1997 agreement with the state to release water from Calaveras Dam for fish in Alameda Creek, arguing that the water is just too vital to San Francisco residents.

Environmentalists say the city is simply hoarding water unnecessarily. According to the Tuolumne River Trust, which tracks the utility commission's Hetch Hetchy system, San Francisco County has the worst record for water conservation and recycling of any urban county in the state.

Michael Carlin, head of the commission's vast water enterprise, said his agency has gotten a bum rap. "Over the past few years, we've changed, and we're taking a more proactive look at protecting habitats," he said. "We're committed to restoring the Alameda Creek watershed."

But when asked what that meant for trout trapped behind Calaveras Dam, Carlin made no promises. In fact, he acknowledged that over the past eighteen months the commission has quietly petitioned the government to make sure it will never be legally required to accommodate the needs of trout in Alameda Creek. The petition was ultimately embraced by the commission's unlikely allies in the Bush administration.

Twentieth-century dam building destroyed migratory habitats for steelhead trout and salmon throughout the West. The lifecycle of these fish depends on their ability to spawn in freshwater creeks and streams and then swim downriver to the ocean before returning upstream to spawn again. Unlike salmon, which die off if they cannot migrate, steelhead adapt if they're trapped behind a dam. Once steelheads no longer migrate, they are

called rainbow trout.

When construction began on the earthen Calaveras Dam in 1918, Alameda Creek, the county's largest freshwater tributary, was teeming with salmon and steelhead all the way from its headwaters above Ohlone Wilderness to where it meets the bay in Fremont. When the dam was built, the salmon caught behind it eventually died. But the steelheads lived on as rainbow trout. Commission biologists now estimate that there are between four hundred and eight hundred trout in Calaveras Reservoir.

For years, it was believed that steelhead no longer inhabited Alameda Creek below the dams. Barriers had been erected that shut off the trout's migratory path, including a twelve-foot concrete "weir" below the BART bridge in Fremont. This had happened throughout the West, so in 1997, the National Marine Fisheries Service listed steelhead of the California Central Coast region as a "threatened" species under the federal Endangered Species Act. But steelheads trapped in reservoirs and better known as rainbows were not included in that listing.

When a few steelhead were discovered in the late '90s, slamming themselves over and over again into the weir during winter rainstorms, controversy reignited over whether they were from the same population as those trapped behind Calaveras and San Antonio dams. Proof came in 2002 when Jennifer Nielsen, a prominent biologist with the US Geological Survey, genetically linked the steelhead in Alameda Creek with the reservoir's so-called rainbow trout.

In June 2004, the National Marine Fisheries Service proposed that steelhead trapped behind some West Coast dams, including all the trout in Calaveras and San Antonio reservoirs, be listed as a threatened species. The move was viewed as a victory for the alliance because the federal listing likely would have forced the Public Utilities Commission to release water year-round into Alameda Creek and provide steelhead passageways to and from the reservoirs.

But in a series of letters, private consultants hired by the commission urged the fisheries service to reverse its proposal. The consultants, Entrix Environmental Consultants of Sacramento, argued that Nielsen's study was based on too few fish.

It's unclear what effect, if any, the letters had, but last month the fisheries service reversed course and decided not to propose the trout as threatened. Craig Wingert, a supervising biologist for the fisheries service, said the turnabout was prompted by objections raised by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which has traditional jurisdiction over freshwater fish. He portrayed the discussions between the two federal agencies as a simple disagreement in which the Marine Fisheries Service ultimately decided to adopt Fish and Wildlife's point of view. But according to another source familiar with the talks, Fish and Wildlife forced the change because the Bush administration simply does not want more species listed as threatened or endangered.

The about-face by the fisheries service does not necessarily mean that East Bay trout will be locked behind dams forever. The commission could change its mind. At last week's meeting, commissioners instructed staff to seek possible compromises with the Alameda Creek Alliance. However, they also refused a request by alliance director Miller to establish the restoration of the entire Alameda Creek trout habitat as an official priority of the agency.

Plans for the new Calaveras Dam have no provision for creating a trout passageway to and from the reservoir. One problem for the alliance is that a fish ladder up the face may be physically impossible. In an interview, Miller suggested a catch-and-release plan in which steelhead that make it up to the base of the dam would be caught and then carried by hand to the reservoir so they can mate with rainbow trout in the creeks above. After the young trout molt, they would be released below the dam.

If the commission ultimately prohibits trout from going to and from Calaveras Reservoir and continues to not release water for downstream fish, Miller said his group will sue. He appears to have state law on his side. In a November 22 letter to the utility commission, state Department of Fish and Game officials indicated that the commission's plan for Calaveras Dam may violate at least two state laws. One requires dam owners to "allow sufficient water to pass over, around, or through the dam, to keep in good condition any fish that may be planted or exist below the dam." The other makes it unlawful for Bay Area dam owners "to construct or maintain ... any device which prevents, impedes, or tends to prevent or impede, the passing of fish up- or downstream."

A protracted lawsuit is the last thing the commission wants. In 2001, state officials ordered Calaveras Reservoir drained to no more than 40 percent of capacity because it straddles the Calaveras Fault zone and the dam is seismically vulnerable. But Carlin said the new dam needs to be finished by 2011, so it can be filled back to its 96,850-acre-feet capacity. That way, the commission will have enough water in the reservoir to allow it to shut

down other sections of its system for upgrades as part of its $4.3 billion retrofit effort.