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A big leap for steelhead trout

By Denis Cuff

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PINOLE – Steelhead trout disappeared or dwindled from most Bay Area creeks over decades of humans straightening, cementing in and building structures in the channels to prevent floods.

The work spared the floods but spoiled the big oceangoing trout.

On Monday, a group of natural resource agencies unveiled a $1 million creek fish passage improvement on Pinole Creek that performs much like a fish ladder to get Central California Coast steelhead past a Caltransculvert under Interstate 80 to reach spawning grounds.

Fishery biologists said the project opens an important door to help restore the steelhead and boosts hope for restoring the Bay Area steelhead from its threatened federal status.

"This is an import effort to help the Central Coast steelhead," said Donnie Ratcliff, a fish biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Allowing the fish to reach 6.7 miles of upstream creek habitat may not seem like a big number, but steelhead habitat is no longer available in most of the other

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Carol Arnold, with Friends of Pinole Creek Watershed, and Bert Mulchaey, with EBMUD, walk along the new fish ladder that runs under I-80 in Pinole.

KRISTOPHERSKINNER/STAFF

Fish

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Bay Area creeks." Ratcliff spoke Monday behind a bowling alley amid the din of loud freeway traffic along the banks of Pinole Creek in western Contra Costa County. A concrete culvert on the creek under I-80 has stopped and stranded migrating steelhead for decades since itwas built in the 1950s. The culvert under the freeway is so wide and flat that steelhead would get stranded there during low creek flows, and swept back downstream in high flows with no place to rest.

"It's like dumping a gold fish out of a bowl onto a big table. With almost no water covering it, the fish can't go anywhere," said Ben Wallace, executive director of the Contra Costa Resource Conservation District, the lead agency in the project. "This project gives fish deep water that acts like a ladder to enable them tokeep moving up." Construction crews added a wall in front of one segment of the culvert, and also a deep notch on the bottom so that the fish are covered by water at least a few inches deep. Other concrete devices called baffles were added to form water pools for steelhead to use to rest and store up energy for their journey upstream.

A series of large boulders also were added to the creek bottom just below the culvert to provide otherresting ponds. Pinole Creek has an unusually high potential tohelp the steelhead because there are no other major barriers to fish migration above the I-80 culvert, said Bert Mulchaey, a supervising fisheries biologist with the East Bay Municipal Utility District, which owns land along upper Pinole Creek.

"Once the fish get past the freeway culvert, there are several good miles of habitat," Mulchaey said. "That's not the case in many areas where creeks have drop structures, concrete lining and many other barriers to fish."

Steelhead are rainbow trout which can either live in fresh water creeks and lakes as small fish, or migrate out to sea and reach much larger sizes of two feet long or more before returning to the creek to spawn.

Friends of Pinole Creek Watershed , a community group and the Contra Costa Resource Conservation Group spent a decade planning the project. Funding came from a variety of state, federal and local sources, including the Resource Conservation District, Contra Costa County, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, the California State Coastal Conservancy and the federal Fish and Wildlife Service.

Mulchaey, the EBMUD biologist who grew up in Pinole, said he used to play in upper portions of the creek as a young boy and catch tadpoles.

"It's exciting to see restoration being done in an area I visited while growing up," Mulchaey said, "and there is a good outlook for the steelhead to return."

A culvert under I-80 in Pinole has been modified to ease the way for steelhead trout heading upstream to spawn.

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