

Calaveras River reveals some of its secrets

By Craig Koscho

Wednesday, November 15, 2006 11:09 AM CST

The Calaveras River produced some surprises for local water officials and marine biologists following six years of study to determine better methods of protecting fish while operating the river and New Hogan Reservoir for water customers.

The reservoir is operated jointly by the Calaveras County Water District, the Stockton East Water District and the Army Corps of Engineers.

In March 2000, heavy rains forced the Corps to release a large amount of water from the reservoir for flood protection, dramatically increasing the river flows.

But when the flows were brought back down, it happened too rapidly for the fish to make their way from deeper reaches on the periphery to the main current, and many became stranded in isolated pools, Stockton East General Manager Kevin Kauffman said.

That triggered the initial efforts that eventually spawned detailed studies of the river and the present Habitat Conservation Plan for its operation.

Residents in Calaveras and San Joaquin county were invited to an open house at the Linden Lions Club on Thursday night to review that plan and learn more about the river.

About 50 people attended the four-hour forum conducted by the water districts and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

The plan is expected to be completed this week, at which time officials will then determine how to proceed with the environmental impact review.

In exchange for better protection of the river, Stockton East would be allowed some "incidental" taking of threatened species, in this case, steelhead trout.

While water officials and experts were very familiar with the river's "mechanics" and its hydrology, Kauffman said they were lacking on information in other areas.

"We knew nothing about the river environmentally," Kauffman said.

When they looked beneath the surface, they found the little Calaveras River had quite a fish population.

"We're seeing more rainbow trout and steelhead on this river than we're seeing

on the Stanislaus,” Kauffman said. “It’s amazing. They love this river.”

That sentiment was echoed by fisheries biologist Doug Demko.

“I was surprised to find the quality and the diversity of habitat in the Calaveras River that I did,” Demko said.

The canyon reach about two miles downstream of the dam “is probably some of the best trout habitat that I’ve seen in the San Joaquin basin,” Demko said. “It’s just incredible.”

The experts are surprised because the Calaveras River is dwarfed by others in California.

With a small drainage basin and no melting snowpack to keep it fed during the summer, the downstream flows depend on the storage at New Melones Reservoir.

But the river has a good slope, abundant gravel, cool water temperatures and trees and limbs that fall into the water providing protection for young fish and backing up more gravel for spawning, Demko said.

“It’s kind of an undiscovered gem,” he added.

That doesn’t mean there aren’t problems, and one of those involves the life cycle of the steelhead trout.

Rainbows and steelheads are the same species of trout, Demko said, but something triggers one to be a rainbow and stay in its home stream while the other becomes a steelhead and migrates farther downstream, even to the ocean.

However, when steelhead migrate downstream or back upstream to spawn, they hit a number of impediments on the Calaveras River.

While it flows relatively unchecked for its first part of the journey downstream of the dam, when the river reaches the Bellota Weir, a large portion of the water is diverted through a 54-inch diameter pipe into the Mormon Slough for domestic use in Stockton.

Along that path and the original river channel, the fish encounter more impediments, such as check dams and road crossings.

Environmentalists have been clamoring for years to get screens with a finer pattern installed on the intakes to prevent the younger fish swimming downstream from being sucked into the pipes.

Work on that and other projects has finally started.

A temporary screen has been installed on his utility's diversion pipe, Kauffman said, and officials are exploring methods of getting individual customers to screen their smaller intake pipes.

Valley Springs resident John Raine, from the New Hogan Lake Conservancy and the Calaveras River Steering Committee, noted that other improvements have been made at the Bellota Weir.

More rock and concrete debris has been added to the lip of the weir so it will hold a deeper pool of water where the first fish ladder sits, Raine said.

And a second ladder has been replaced with a new, improved model.

A study has recommended a new design for the weir to change the structure from its present one, and install a fish passage around the hurdle.

But at an estimated \$8 million in 2004 costs, the money just isn't there yet, Kauffman said.

Meanwhile, other improvements have been made along the length of the river, such as adding more gravel to spawning beds.

Ultimately, it could be the rate payers who foot the bill for all this.

Raine said that, since this is a federal, state and local issue, the cost should be split equally in thirds among the participants.

Kauffman certainly supports that suggestion, but is not sure it will actually happen.

Even though the Calaveras County Water District is a participant in the reservoir and river operations, they don't have the same impact and so its cost would primarily be limited to some of the research and environmental work on the plan, CCWD General Manager Dave Andres said.

The district does take water for its Jenny Lind treatment plant that supplies residents of Rancho Calaveras.

But that's a different kind of diversion, actually filtering the water through the bottom of the river bed, Andres said.

"There's no chance for the fish to get into that at all," he said.

Raine would like to see CCWD work with the handful of agricultural users in

Calaveras County to screen their individual intakes.

Andres said part of the overall plan includes making sure those nine growers understand what the plan says and requires of them.

As for the rest of the river, Raine gives Stockton East credit for “finally coming around” and moving forward.

“We are extremely pleased with National Marine Fisheries Service and Stockton East Water District in making rapid progress toward cleaning up some of the issues on the river,” he said.

Contact Craig Koscho at ckoscho@calaverasenterprise.com.