

Water district's fish run plan needs work, state agency says

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STOCKTON - It took the Stockton water district five years to come up with a government-mandated plan for protecting fish runs on the Calaveras River.

But it still needs work, according to a key state agency.

In a recent letter to the Stockton East Water District, the California Department of Fish and Game said the district's habitat conservation plan for the river, which runs from the Calaveras County foothills to the Delta, would not help fish at all.

"I think it's fair to say that we think there's some additional items that need to be addressed," said John Nelson, a fishery biologist with the state department.

Stockton East provides most of Stockton with drinking water and farmers around the city with irrigation from the Calaveras. Relatively small and fed mostly by rainfall, the river flows through Stockton from New Hogan Reservoir, 30 miles to the northeast.

The district has kept its habitat conservation plan out of the public eye, although The Record has obtained a copy of the Fish and Game Department's comments on the plan sent to the district in an April 10 letter.

Stockton East manager Kevin Kauffman called the letter disappointing and noted that it expressed some of the same concerns fish-protection groups have about the river. Several fish-protection groups filed a complaint against the district in January, arguing its operation of New Hogan Dam had left hundreds of spawning salmon and steelhead stranded in the river.

Fish and Game's comments don't have any real power other than to pressure Stockton East to improve its plan. The district needs the plan to get a permit from the federal government for accidentally killing protected salmon and steelhead species while delivering water to its customers.

The plan is supposed to show Stockton East is serious about protecting fish. But a key sticking point between the district and Fish and Game is flow, or the amount of water released from New Hogan Dam that is sufficient to allow fish to migrate up and down the river.

Fish and Game has criticized the district for not including plans to increase flows for fish. Yet Kauffman said the Calaveras River's flow isn't consistent enough to support fish every year, and the district manages the dam for its customers first, fish second.

"We're not going to hurt ourselves just because (Fish and Game) says flow solves all problems," Kauffman said.

"On the positive side, we want input; we want to know where we're screwing up," he said. "Anything that's in here, we want to take to heart and improve (the plan)."

Some fish-protection groups have long held that Stockton East has spent too long on its plan, and now they say Fish and Game's criticism proves the district isn't serious about protecting fish.

"That habitat management plan is basically a plan where they don't want to admit they would prefer to do nothing," said John Raine, a Calaveras County resident who used to build fish habitat in the reservoir and on the river.

Raine agrees with the district that the flows are not consistent enough to support annual fish runs. But the river could be managed in a way to increase opportunities for fish.



Valley Springs-area resident John Raine believes Stockton East Water District is stalling on its plan to help fish on the Calaveras River

Kauffman argues the district has done extensive work at the Bellota weir, near Linden, by installing temporary fish screens and planning a permanent one. The weir is often a trouble spot, because fish have difficulty getting over it when flows are too slow or too strong.

Most recently, Stockton East built holes in the dams along the river for fish to swim through during high flows. This prevents fish from crashing over the top of the dams and hurting themselves, Kauffman said.

The district is preparing a response to Fish and Game, he added.

Fish and Game officials "don't give us credit for anything we've already done," he said. "It's a little unfair at this point."

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