

Water users may pay more so fish might live

By **Alex Breitler**

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LINDEN - Talk about swimming upstream.

Salmon and steelhead face more than a mere uphill journey to reach prime spawning grounds on the Calaveras River below New Hogan Dam, nearly 40 miles east of Stockton.

The river's lowest reaches are its driest, so the fish risk getting stranded in an isolated pool when flows are low. Farther upstream they struggle mightily to flip themselves over Bellota Weir, where much of the river's water is diverted for farmers and city dwellers.

The Stockton East Water District is required by law to get a permit for fish that are killed as a result of its operations, and to make efforts to lessen that loss. A plan more than five years in the making could require somewhere under \$20 million in improvements - a cost that district officials say likely will be passed on to those who ultimately consume its water, including farmers and most Stockton residents.

About \$1 million already has been spent in studies, said Kevin Kauffman, general manager of the water district.

"It's going to be fairly aggressive, because the (government) agencies want it to be aggressive," he said.

A draft version of this "habitat conservation plan" should be released for public comment by spring 2007, Kauffman said last week at a public meeting in Linden.

Conservationists are watching the plan closely to ensure it will help fish. The river just below the dam is prime spawning grounds, some of the best of any stream in the San Joaquin Valley, said Bill Jennings of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance.

The lower section, below Bellota Weir, is where it goes kaput, he said.

"Our concern is, how do we get this connection?" Jennings said. "How do we get fish in and out of the system?"

He is calling for a rule requiring minimum flows at Bellota Weir. Such a rule is part of the draft plan, but only farther upstream where there is more water, district officials said.

A permanent fish ladder that could cost several million dollars also is part of the plan, as well as installing fish screens over some of the roughly 200 diversion points along the river.

The amount of water flowing to farms and Stockton won't change, officials have said. It is the timing of releases from the dam that could be different.

John Raine, a Valley Springs resident and member of the Calaveras River Steering Committee, said he is concerned about the plan's proposed 50-year duration. He thinks it should be renewed and reviewed more often to see if it is working.

That said, he admits that the Calaveras River may never see the consistently strong salmon runs that occur in other rivers. That is because the Calaveras watershed is fed mostly by rain and receives little snow melt.

"It's a good river for fish," he said, "but the water flows fluctuate so much that you can't really expect to have a good run of fish every year."

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