SignOnSanDiego.com THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE

PRINT THIS

Related Terms: Carlsbad, Escondido, Los Angeles, Oceanside, San Diego County, Union-Tribune, Valley Center, North County, Orange County

California's Water | A Vanishing Resource

Steelhead strategy roils local waters

Fisheries plan would cut into supplies for people

By Mike Lee
Union-Tribune Staff Writer

2:00 a.m. August 4, 2009

(Click for large image)

Utilities manager Mike McGrath at Oceanside's Mission Basin Groundwater Purification Facility, which could see a reduction in its water supply from the San Luis Rey watershed if a federal plan takes effect. (Charlie Neuman / U-T) -

DETAILS

PUBLIC MEETING

What: Federal fishery biologists will outline their recommended steps for restoring the population of Southern California steelhead

When: 3 to 5 p.m. Aug. 25

Where: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office, 6010 Hidden Valley Road, Carlsbad

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA STEELHEAD

- Migrate from mountain streams to the ocean and back.
- At their peak, more than 30,000 adults returned annually to spawn.
- The number has dwindled to about 500 a year because of dam construction, water diversions, pollution and other

factors.

- Protected under the Endangered Species Act since 1997.

SOURCE: *National Marine Fisheries Service*

Online: For the National Marine Fisheries Service's steelhead recovery plan, go to **swr.nmfs.noaa.gov/recovery**

A new federal proposal to reel Southern California steelhead salmon back from the brink of extinction threatens to disrupt fragile water systems that serve millions of residents from Santa Barbara to North County.

Vista, Oceanside, Escondido and at least five Indian tribes, which together provide water to more than 400,000 people, could be hit directly by efforts to make the San Luis Rey River run like it did before dams, pollution and development devastated steelhead populations. They might have to take less water from the waterway for decades.

The effects would ripple countywide when those providers seek more imported water, effectively competing with other local suppliers.

Similar scenarios probably would play out across Southern California once the National Marine Fisheries Service finalizes its strategy for steelhead recovery, as it intends to do by early next year.

Water supplies already are low because of drought, population growth and court-ordered reductions to protect other fish species.

“It's the worst time in the world to even think about doing something like this,” said Gary Arant, general manager of the Valley Center Municipal Water District, where farmers have been hard-hit by water cutbacks in the past two years. “At some point, we have to think about what's more important – re-establishing the steelhead or providing water for people and our communities.”

After steelhead were added to the Endangered Species Act list in 1997, federal officials have spent years on the complex process of developing a recovery plan for the fish.

The 430-page proposal from the fisheries service, released last week, lacks mandate power. But its recommendations will set the tone for when the agency and other regulators review water and flood-control projects.

“Permitting agencies can come back to you and say, 'We have got a concern now that we didn't have before,' ” said Roger Patterson, a top official at the Metropolitan Water District in Los Angeles.

Nowhere is the conflict between protecting fish and securing water supplies clearer than in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, where federal efforts to help the threatened smelt have slashed the amount of water available for statewide distribution.

Leaders of water districts fear the steelhead recovery blueprint is a precursor to similar restrictions on local lakes and rivers.

“A new environmental use of this water puts further pressure on the overall water supply system in California,” said Don Smith of the Vista Irrigation District, which relies on Lake Henshaw in the San Luis Rey River watershed for roughly one-quarter of its inventory.

Chris Yates, a fisheries service supervisor for Southern California, cast his agency's proposal as the opening of a dialogue.

“We are looking at trying to re-establish the species across the extent of its range. It's an incredibly daunting set of actions . . . but you have to start somewhere,” he said.

Fisheries officials won't predict how much the draft document will change because they want public feedback before making final revisions. So far, the plan lacks cost estimates and timelines. Funding would come from federal, state and local agencies, as well as conservation groups, private property owners and others.

Steelhead – technically a salmon but commonly called a trout – were the only abundant salmon species indigenous to the coastal mountain ranges of Southern California until the post-World War II era.

More than 30,000 of them returned from the ocean each year to spawn until dams, concrete channels, contamination and other man-made hazards severely damaged their habitat. Today's annual runs number about 500 adults, making steelhead one of the rarest species in the nation.

Environmentalists and California's wildlife leaders applaud the fisheries service for its proposal.

“This draft plan provides a comprehensive road map so steelhead can survive, if not thrive, in our urban environment,” said Ed Pert at the California Department of Fish and Game.

Nica Knite, a program manager at California Trout in San Diego, urged water officials and others to support steelhead, once a prized fish for anglers.

“We don't want to be looking in hindsight at the loss of steelhead when we could have done something to save them,” Knite said.

The fisheries service has identified about a dozen top-priority watersheds for the species, including the San Luis Rey River, San Juan Creek in Orange County and Malibu Creek in Los Angeles County.

San Mateo Creek and the Santa Margarita River are listed as second-tier areas for steelhead recovery in San Diego County.

The agency's proposal calls for making more water available in the targeted rivers at certain times of the year, removing or modifying dams, minimizing water pollution, curbing fishing and fully enforcing laws and regulations concerning steelhead.

For the San Luis Rey River, that would involve fixing roads and culverts to improve fish passage, moving livestock and farms to minimize water pollution and revising land-use policies to better protect the waterway.

Lori Vereker, utilities director for Escondido, questioned whether it's feasible to restore the San Luis Rey basin to the condition needed for large steelhead runs. Escondido gets up to 30 percent of its water from the watershed.

“The financial burden in doing all of that would be – I don't even like to think how big it is,” Vereker said.

Oceanside's leaders said they're all for steelhead recovery projects as long as they're done somewhere else. They're ramping up withdrawals of groundwater in the lower reaches of the San Luis Rey watershed to offset shrinking imports from Northern California and the Colorado River.

“If you have to supply flows for these fish, then it would be a restriction on how much water we could withdraw,” said Mo Lahsaie, coordinator of Oceanside's clean-water program. “Reintroducing this fish into this watershed has so many financial and logistical challenges.”

Mike Lee: *(619) 542-4570; mike.lee@uniontrib.com*

Mike Lee: (619) 542-4570;

Find this article at:
http://www3.signonsandiego.com/stories/2009/aug/04/1n4steel214919-steelhead-strategy-roils-local-wate

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright 2007 Union-Tribune Publishing Co. • A Copley Newspaper Site