



Steelhead recovery planned

By **Brian Bullock/Staff Writer** bbullock@santamariatimes.com | Posted: Saturday, January 21, 2012 12:15 am

Southern California steelhead are some of the most threatened fish in the federal Endangered Species Act, and their northern-most cousins inhabit the creeks and streams of Santa Barbara County.

The fish, whose habitat ranges from the Santa Maria River to the Mexican border, once numbered an estimated 45,000, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service.

Now they are as rare San Francisco Giants fans in Los Angeles.

Last week, NOAA Fisheries released its recently completed recovery plan for the fish, one of six Pacific salmon species native to North America, and it gives the agency a blueprint for the long term recovery of the fish in Southern California streams.

"It's worth noting that this plan has been many years in the preparation. It has gone through a lot of review," said Mark Capelli, NOAA Fisheries recovery coordinator for the Santa Barbara County area. "It's the first plan of its kind to be completed in California, so it represents a major milestone in the recovery of these fish throughout California."

The plan calls for a number of steps to be taken to help the species recover, including better managing stream flows from area reservoirs to allow the fish access to the ocean, and restoration of riparian habitat.

It also calls for removal of physical barriers to spawning and rearing headwaters in Santa Barbara County, which include everything from reed-choked streams and estuaries to the dams at Twitchell, Cachuma and Gibraltar reservoirs.

Just how those barriers are removed or bypassed is something the plan doesn't address, but Capelli said removing those dams isn't in the plan.

Capelli said a smaller dam on the Sisquoc River has already been removed, and proposals to remove the Rindge and Malibu dams from Malibu Creek, and the O'Neill Diversion Dam on the Santa Margarita River are in the recovery plan.

While the plan doesn't call for the removal of northern Santa Barbara County's reservoir dams, it does call for some kind of modification that will allow fish passage to upstream spawning grounds. Capelli said that could mean anything from building diversions to physically moving the fish around the dam.

"None of those specific means of providing passage are identified here. There are things that have to be worked out on a case by case basis and are site specific," Capelli said.

Mission Creek in Santa Barbara, portions of which had been channelized - turned into a concrete halfpipe - by Caltrans flood control projects, is currently being made more fish friendly by creating fish channels and ponds, Capelli said.

There is also an in-stream flow study being conducted for the Santa Maria River, which could allow easier passage for the fish between the Pacific and the upper tributaries of the Santa Maria and Sisquoc rivers.

Capelli said the Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan will help those efforts by allowing them more ammunition when they apply for federal, state, local and private grants.

"The plan provides an outline of what needs to be done over these watersheds. It's not a regulatory document, it's a planning document. It provides guidance for people involved in those initiatives," Capelli said.

Tom Fayram, county director of water resources, said the county has worked since 1997 within the guidelines set when the steelhead were listed as a federally endangered species.

"Whenever we do a maintenance project or capital project, under the Endangered Species Act we have to make sure we adhere to that," Fayram said. "We've worked with NOAA to identify barriers and identify areas for improvement for many years."

The Monte Arido Highlands is the northern-most section in the Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan. It ranges from the Santa Maria River to the Santa Clara River near Oxnard, and wraps around the Conception Coast, which includes coastal streams from Jalama Creek to Rincon Creek.

Capelli said the Northern Santa Barbara County streams are ripe for restoration, and added that the Santa Ynez River is already well managed to allow steelhead migration.

"The Santa Maria River hasn't been channelized like the Los Angeles River," Capelli said. "It has a levee, but it's set back from the river. It's suitable and it can accommodate fish movement."

"There are sand and gravel operations on it, but the river system as a whole is largely intact. So we're trying to figure out how to put back the broken pieces as best as we can. The Santa Ynez has three dams on it. It has a lot more spawning and rearing habitat above them than virtually any river on the coast."

Capelli said the Cachuma Water Agencies have already taken several steps to improve both stream flow and habitat for migrating fish.

Some of those projects include: the Lake Cachuma Surcharge Project, which increased the height of Bradbury Dam and the depth of the lake; The Salsipuedes Creek and Hilton Creek fish passages; and the El Jaro Creek streambed restoration.

Much like juvenile steelhead called "fry," which begin their lives in inland creeks and streams, the recovery plan is in its infancy, Capelli said. But completion of the planning document is a big step in helping the fish population increase.

"These fish are remarkable in that they are very resilient and they are very resourceful. And the fact that they have persisted in Southern California in the wake of what's happened to the watershed, we're confident that these fish will respond," he said.

"The fish didn't get in this condition overnight, and we're not going to get them out of it overnight. It's going to take a long term effort."