

Published June 10th, 2009

Rainbow Trout to Return to San Pablo Creek?

By Sophie Braccini



(L to R) Michelle Luebke instructs Barbara Denny and Brian Waters on how to collect samples in the San Pablo Creek Photo Sophie Braccini

Six months ago, the Friends of the Orinda Creek (FOC) assisted the Contra Costa County Department of Conservation and Development (CCCD) to test the waters of the San Pablo Creek. The results are in and the waters of the primary creek that flows through Orinda are in good enough shape to support the re-introduction of trout. This is good news for creek supporters, because for some time there were critical questions as to the condition of the creek and its ability to support a species of trout that was once a natural part of our local environment. But before residents can watch silver reflections gliding through local waters, obstacles need to be removed and the main property owner of the watershed, the East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD), needs to climb on board.

The Friends of Orinda Creek (FOC) is ready to begin the project of repopulating the creek with the majestic rainbow trout. However, one small but formidable physical obstacle stands in the way of restoring the fish to its natural habitat; a 14-foot weir, owned and operated by EBMUD, that's located just upstream of the Bear Creek Road crossing. The old weir, now full of sediment after years of service, presents a hurdle to any trout seeking to follow its natural instinct to migrate upstream from San Pablo Reservoir to spawn in the upper reaches of San Pablo Creek.

"This structure still has a function for us," says EBMUD's Eileen White, who is in charge of infrastructure, "it reduces the deposit of debris and sediments in the San Pablo Reservoir and slows runoff during intense storm events." In an effort to work around this obstacle, the FOC proposes to establish a fish ladder or similar solution.

San Pablo Creek runs from the southeast to the northwest, originating near Orinda and flowing into San Pablo Bay. It drains one of the largest watersheds in the East Bay. Historically there were annual runs of rainbow trout in the creek. Some rainbow trout have been spotted in the Moraga Creek swimming up from the San Leandro reservoir. "Trout are the top predators of our streams; reintroducing their population is a testimony of the restoration we have undertaken with the Orinda residents," said FOC member Brian Waters.

In its effort to restore the trout, the FOC enlisted the support of the Department of Fish and Game (DFG). A meeting of representatives from the three organizations was organized on August 20, 2007. "By the end of the meeting, EBMUD staff adopted the position that they didn't think that San Pablo Creek above the barrier dam had adequate water quality and habitat conditions to support a trout population," remembers Waters, "and that it would be incumbent on FOC to demonstrate otherwise before they or DFG should give further consideration to restoring rainbow trout to San Pablo Creek upstream of the barrier dam."

The quality of the water and its habitat is tested yearly by the CCCD, using the manpower of volunteer groups. Last month the FOC received the report of the sampling that had been done six months ago. "The biodiversity of the benthic macroinvertebrate (BMI) community in upper San Pablo Creek is similar to the biodiversity downstream of the San Pablo Reservoir where there is a current population of steelhead," said Michelle Luebke, Watershed Monitoring Coordinator for CCCD, as she looked at the results, adding that she is not a fisheries' biologist. "We hope the 2009 results show as good, if not better, trout habitat conditions as

did the 2008 results," said Waters, "FOC is confident that the water quality, benthic macroinvertebrate (BMI), and habitat condition data demonstrate that the reach of San Pablo Creek upstream of the barrier dam can support resident rainbow trout, and that there should be no further roadblocks to initiating a trout population restoration program in the creek."

EBMUD's new manager of the Natural Resources Department, Richard Sykes, was delighted to hear the good news when we contacted him to find out what the agency's position was on the reintroduction of the trout. "We would like to see what new data the FOC have gathered," said Sykes, "let's reconvene and discuss what can be done." Sykes added that what's good for fish is good for human and that the agency is very favorable to any initiative that will improve the quality of the water that reaches its reservoirs.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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