

## OFFSPRING OF CALAVERAS RIVER SALMON MAY BE LEFT HIGH AND DRY

By **Alex Breitler**  
February 13, 2012  
Record Staff Writer

In the fall, the Calaveras River hosted hundreds of Chinook salmon, which swam upstream through Stockton for the first time since 2006.

But the offspring of those fish will be lucky to get out of the river alive.

Virtually dry conditions in Mormon Slough and the Stockton Diverting Canal have left more than 100 salmon "redds," or nests, without the water that the fertilized eggs need to survive, a biologist says.

One activist blames the sad ending of this success story on the perpetual delay of a plan to improve conditions for Calaveras fish.

"The tragedy of this is that everybody's celebrating the fact that there's fish on the river, but we don't have things set up properly to steer them up where they can spawn," said Jeremy Terhune, head of the environmental group Friends of the Calaveras River. "It's the greatest irony of all."

In the fall, officials spent \$460,000 in local, state and federal money removing a barrier that long has stood in the way of the migrating Chinook - on the Stockton Diverting Canal just east of Highway 99.

Then, blessed with a surplus of water from the previous winter, they released extra water from New Hogan Dam.

The fish got the hint. An estimated 465 salmon ventured upstream to spawn.

About three-quarters of those fish, however, could not advance past a much larger barrier: the Bellota Weir near Linden. They were forced to lay their eggs below the weir, where there is less water and less favorable habitat.

Now, river flows have subsided. It has been a dry winter and officials say there isn't enough water to keep the lower Calaveras wet, to keep those new eggs alive.

"We wish we could save them all, and in past years we have. This year we just don't have the water to do it," said Kevin Kauffman, general manager of the Stockton East Water District, which diverts the Calaveras River to farms and to city residents.

Stockton East has committed to building a new fish passage at Bellota once a long-delayed habitat plan for the Calaveras is completed. The plan has been in development for 10 years; for the past 18 months it has been awaiting approval in the federal bureaucracy.

Had the fall's fish been able to get past Bellota to spawn in a wetter portion of the river, their progeny might have had a better chance at survival, said Kari Burr, a biologist with the Fishery Foundation of California, which monitors the Calaveras.

"Unfortunately, the majority of spawning occurs below the weir because it is a significant barrier to fish passage," Burr said in an email. "It has not been dealt with and likely won't be until the (conservation plan) process is complete. Unfortunately the process has gone on for over a decade of operations without an agreement."

The National Marine Fisheries Service said it's still working with water districts to edit the plan. Then it must be reviewed within the agency.

In a statement, a spokesman said the Calaveras plan is "an important component" to the recovery of fish species. But it has been delayed because of so many other high-priority projects in the San Joaquin River basin.

Doug Demko, a fisheries biologist who consults for the Stockton water district, said video footage shows more than 100 salmon did manage to pass above the weir.

It's important to remember that the fish that visited the Calaveras last year were not the progeny of previous Calaveras River fish, he said. They were hatchery fish that were artificially spawned.

"I understand the knee-jerk reaction for people to want to save fish," Demko said. "But at some point we have to start being alarmed by the replacement of wild stocks with genetically inferior hatchery fish, rather than trying to save every last one of them."

Contact reporter Alex Breitler at (209) 546-8295 or [abreitler@recordnet.com](mailto:abreitler@recordnet.com). Visit his blog at [recordnet.com/breitlerblog](http://recordnet.com/breitlerblog).

[http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20120213/A\\_NEWS/202130319/-1/A\\_NEWS](http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20120213/A_NEWS/202130319/-1/A_NEWS)