

WORK REMOVES ANOTHER BARRIER FOR MIGRATING CALAVERAS RIVER FISH

Photo 1 of 5 | [Zoom Photo +](#)



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Donnie Ratcliff talks Tuesday about the removal of a decades-old concrete crossing that was impairing migrating salmon and steelhead on Mormon Slough east of Stockton. CRAIG SANDERS/The Record



In August 2013, a crossing on Mormon Slough is demolished so it can be replaced with a more fish friendly structure. *Courtesy California Fish and Wil*



The railroad crossing on the diverting canal just east of Wilson Way is one of four fish barriers that the California Department of Fish and Wildlife have said needs to be modified. *CRAIG SANDERS/The Record*

By **Alex Breitler**

October 30, 2013

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October 30, 2013 12:00 AM

Like many rural property owners, Vince and Linda Caprini value their privacy.

Surely they wouldn't mind if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the state Department of Water Resources, the Stockton East Water District, and a bunch of guys with hard hats and excavators did some work on the river that passes through the middle of their walnut and cherry orchards.

"It was a leap of faith," Linda Caprini said. "There were all these people in our backyard, which we're not too comfortable with. But they sure did a good job, and they really cared about the fish and the wildlife down there."

In an example of property owners and the government working in harmony, the Calaveras River is now a bit more accommodating for migrating salmon and steelhead.

Crews recently knocked out a decades-old concrete crossing that blocked fish from traveling upstream. They replaced it with a higher bridge beneath which the fish can easily pass.

The original bridge had been built by Vince Caprini's grandfather, an Italian immigrant who bought the farm with money he earned as a garbage man. He built the crossing to allow equipment to access the rest of the property.

Over the years the family often enjoyed seeing salmon waiting in pools below the crossing. Those days may be over now that the fish can pass through, but Linda Caprini understands the benefit.

"They're beautiful fish," she said.

This is the second major Calaveras barrier to be recently removed or modified to help fish. In 2011 crews improved the Budiselich dam, on the Stockton Diverting Canal just east of Highway 99. This latest project took place farther upstream on Mormon Slough, which basically doubles as the Calaveras River east of Stockton.

In a sense, it is a small victory. There are many more barriers that can impede the progress of salmon and steelhead on their journey toward quality spawning habitat below New Hogan Dam.



This concrete roadway across Mormon Slough east of Linden is one of four fish barriers that the California Department of Fish and Wildlife have said need to be modified to allow fish to pass more easily.

CRAIG SANDERS/The Record

The largest of those obstacles - Bellota Weir - is years overdue for a multimillion-dollar upgrade.

But on a humble little stream like the Calaveras, you fix what you can, when you can.

"If I can't eat the whole pie in one bite, what can I eat now?" said Donnie Ratcliff, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "I think we owe it to the fish and to the general public that if we have man-made problems that we can fix, let's fix them."

The Calaveras is home to federally threatened steelhead. And many years, Chinook salmon make their way upstream in the fall. In fact, with a good rainstorm or two, there is a good chance hefty Chinook might swim beneath the Caprinis' new bridge in a few weeks' time.

The old crossing was fitted with culverts at least 36 inches in diameter allowing for water and fish to pass through. But when the stream was low, fish couldn't jump the 7 vertical feet from the river channel to the pipes.

Even when flows were normal, the water sometimes shot through the narrow pipes so quickly that the fish couldn't fight their way through.

The rebuilt bridge was expected to cost about \$260,000, with half of the money coming from Stockton East and half from federal grants.

"We make things easier for fish, and our customers end up with a safer crossing than what they had before," said Scot Moody, general manager at Stockton East.

There is much work still to be done on the often forgotten Calaveras, and at the moment, no more money to do it. Officials have identified two more barriers that are considered a high priority for removal, but there are close to two dozen others as well.

The best spawning habitat for fish is above Bellota, so if fixing problems downstream is going to have the maximum benefit, the Bellota Weir must be upgraded, biologists say.

That upgrade, estimated in the past to cost \$7 million, will be part of a Calaveras River habitat conservation plan that has been under development since 2002, said Erin Strange, a biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Officials last October said that the plan would be out by the end of 2012. That didn't happen. Strange said the process has slowed for a variety of reasons at both the local

and federal level, but she said the draft plan itself is "pretty much done" and she said Tuesday that the end is in sight.

"There will be fish passage at Bellota" in the plan, Strange said.

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Workers install precast concrete structures to form a bridge for farming traffic across Mormon Slough in September.

Courtesy California Fish and Wil

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