

PROJECTS TO PUSH FISH BACK TO WHERE THEY ONCE BELONGED

By **Alex Breitler**
September 08, 2011
Record Staff Writer

STOCKTON - From Stockton to Valley Springs, the Calaveras River is crossed by no fewer than 97 man-made structures.

Dams and weirs. Roads and bridges. Some with culverts, some without.

Together, they form a 38-mile-long obstacle course for migratory salmon and steelhead as they attempt to swim home to spawn.

It might soon get a little easier. Next week, workers will begin what was described as the first of many projects to help salmon and steelhead gain the upper reaches of the river, where they might spawn and their progeny might someday return.

State and federal agencies and the Stockton East Water District are spending roughly \$460,000 to improve the old Budiselich dam just east of Highway 99. The dam is on the Stockton Diverting Canal, through which much of the Calaveras' flow is funneled.

Until now, fish trying to flop over the concrete base of the dam during the fall or winter months were forced to scale a relatively steep 7-foot mound to the base of the structure. When river flows were low, the fish fell short.

Stockton East will reshape the channel so that the climb is more gradual. They'll build a series of rock weirs that basically form a terracelike approach to the dam. Fish will climb this crude "ladder" one foot at a time until they've crested the top.

The new approach should allow fish to pass even when less water is flowing through the channel.

"We're massively lowering the amount of water it will take" to get fish through, said Donnie Ratcliff, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Stockton.

"I'm excited," Ratcliff said Wednesday as officials gathered at the dam to celebrate the beginning of construction. "This has been several years in the making. Everybody knows it needs to happen, and everyone has been on board."

Stockton East once denied that there were steelhead in the Calaveras, though fishermen had insisted otherwise.

The district has since worked with federal agencies on a plan that would allow it to continue diverting water for farms and the city of Stockton while also protecting fish.

There has been much debate over whether such a plan should include mandatory downstream flows from New Hogan Dam near Valley Springs.

Kevin Kauffman, general manager of Stockton East, has said the Calaveras simply can't provide consistent flows for fish.

But Kauffman expects the long-delayed conservation plan will include requirements to improve fish passage. Fixing the Budiselich dam and other obstacles will conform with that mandate.

"We're showing our commitment," Kauffman said. "We're not going to walk away from that commitment."

Of the 97 man-made structures in the river, officials later identified about 26 that are especially problematic. Budiselich, a flashboard dam built in the 1950s by farmer Frank Budiselich, was near the top of the list.

In 2001, fish were stranded at the dam. Salmon have been stranded in various locations on the Calaveras since as far back as 1955.

Work also is planned to address three additional barriers at a later date. The cost should total somewhere shy of \$2 million, Kauffman said.

The goal is to push the fish above Bellota Weir, where the Calaveras has the deep pools and gravel that weary adventurers need to successfully spawn.

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