

CALAVERAS RIVER PLAN PROGRESSES

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Record Staff Writer
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As the public salutes the steelhead Sunday, a much-delayed plan to make the Calaveras River more hospitable for the fish may finally be close to completion.

The federal government said this week that a draft of the plan will be finished by year's end.

Negotiations between fishery and water officials began about 2002, and numerous expected release dates have come and gone. The Stockton East Water District finished the majority of its work on the plan three years ago, General Manager Kevin Kauffman said; since then the document has been at the offices of the National Marine Fisheries Service, which is busy with larger matters, such as the restoration of the San Joaquin River.

"There are some big things going on," said Erin Strange, a Fisheries Service biologist. "We certainly haven't lost focus on the Calaveras. We've been working on it pretty hard."

The "habitat conservation plan," as it's known under federal law, would allow Stockton East to continue diverting Calaveras water even if steelhead - a federally protected species - are harmed in the process.

In exchange for that allowance, Stockton East would agree to improve conditions in the river. The district already has fixed one barrier that prevented fish from passing upstream when water levels were low.

Most significantly, the plan - which won't be final until sometime next year - will start the clock on Stockton East's multimillion-dollar promise to improve fish passage at Bellota Weir near Linden, a major obstacle to migrating steelhead.

The improvements should also benefit Chinook salmon, which swam up the Calaveras last year for the first time since 2006.

Environmentalists have pressed for additional water to remain in the river for fish, but water officials say the Calaveras - a source of drinking water for Stockton and irrigation water for east county farms - fluctuates so much that it cannot always provide additional flows.

"The key is, if there's a perception out there that somehow there's going to be a miraculous improvement (in fish populations), people are setting themselves up for disappointment," Kauffman said.

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

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