

Culvert work in San Anselmo seeks to help threatened fish

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BELOW BUSY Center Boulevard in San Anselmo crews are working to make a concrete culvert more fish friendly in the hope more steelhead trout are able to spawn, improving the health of the species.

In some cases, structures ended up in creeks, as in San Anselmo where culverts were built to bridge San Anselmo Creek, first for a railroad and then for the automobile.

While the culvert design allows water to flow, it works too well.

Creek waters shoot through the culvert over 350 feet of the slick concrete, which offers no resistance to water. The force is so strong in the rainy season it has made the journey for fish seeking to swim upstream to spawn immensely difficult.

"And there is a 4-foot drop before the culvert as well because of erosion, so unless the water is just right in height, there was no way to get into the culvert," said Sandy Guldman, president of Friends of the Corte Madera Creek Watershed, the group overseeing the project. "Even if they get in the culvert there were no pools for them to rest and many would get pushed back out by the force of the water."

But after \$600,000 of work funded largely by the California Department of Fish and Game is done next month, this winter's spawning season should be a little easier for the fish, which are returning from the open ocean to the waters in which they were born.

A fish ladder will go in on the downstream end of the culvert, allowing them easier access to the culvert. A series of raised concrete baffles have been put in the culvert. It will slow water and allow pooling areas, places for fish to rest as they make their way through.

The project will also include repairing some of the bridge's structural issues and restoring the creek banks with native plants.

The work included temporarily damming off the creek so work could be done without water flowing into the work area, but the site remains moist.

"The groundwater is difficult to control, it bubbles up from everywhere," said Tran Tang, project manger, who works for Glissman Excavating of Penryn.

Tang wants to keep the water free of any work-related material before it is pumped back into the creek, otherwise it could degrade water quality.

"I love creek work, it's more rewarding than working on a road in 100-degree heat," he said, on a cool morning last week.

The work, which started just after the Fourth of July, could be finished as soon as mid-September.

But the work on barriers is not done. More fish barriers exist along San Anselmo Creek, most notably a bridge at Saunders Avenue in San Anselmo. A new bridge would be needed there, and at a hefty \$2 million price tag, funds have yet to be identified. City officials are seeking state and federal money to do that work.

San Anselmo Creek is part of the larger 28-square-mile Corte Madera Creek watershed. The friends group has created a list of 26 barriers to fish in the system.

"This is an important first one to do," Guldman said. "It gives us a start. You do them one at a time."

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