

Steelhead recovery efforts may yank Ben Lomond dam

Fish + Fishing
By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

A summer dam, which has provided a swimming hole in Ben Lomond for more than half a century, may be yanked based on new federal rules protecting fish.

National Marine Fisheries Service officials concluded the Ben Lomond Dam is in violation of laws protecting steelhead and coho salmon migrations. They recommended the annual installation of the dam be stopped.

That conclusion, however, rankled residents who contend the federal agency doesn't know its fish, let alone the fun and fire protection the dam provides on the San Lorenzo River.

"I can't feature this at all," said Pat Liebenthal. The 76-year-old lifelong resident of Ben Lomond learned to swim just upstream of the dam.

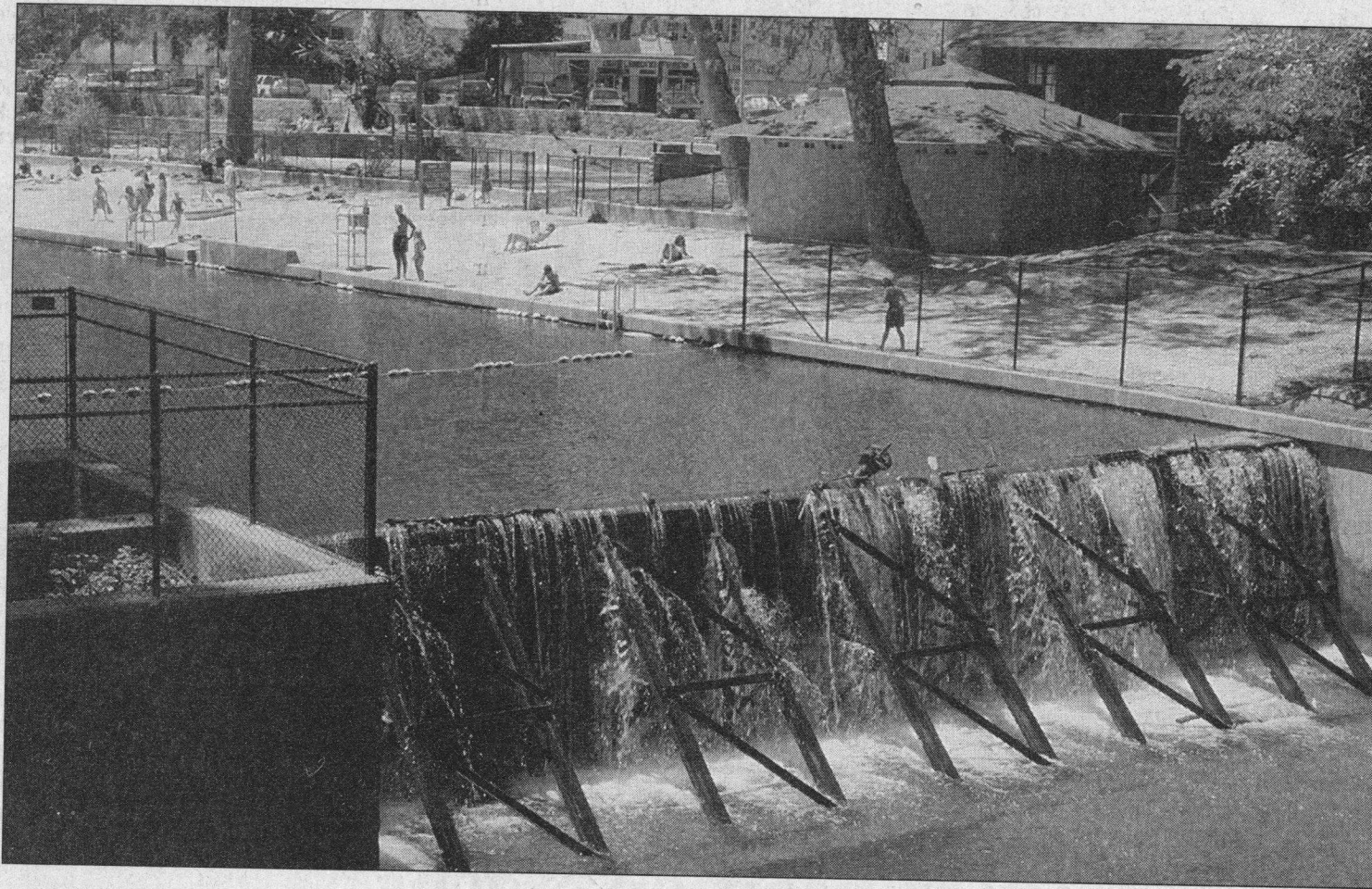
"When the fish go upstream to spawn, there isn't any dam there. That's what's so crazy about this whole thing," she said.

The Ben Lomond Dam, operated by the Santa Cruz County Parks Department in Ben Lomond Park, is among the first of dozens of summer dams in fish-bearing streams being scrutinized in light of federal rules prohibiting "taking" of protected species. The upstream Boulder Creek dam and a handful of other summer ponding dams will be looked at also, said Patrick Rutten, National Marine Fisheries Service supervisor.

In the San Lorenzo River, the federal rules apply to steelhead trout and coho salmon. Both are listed as threatened species. Anything that kills, injures, degrades habitat or impairs behavior such as spawning and migrating is prohibited.

Federal officials contend keeping the dams down is an important factor to return the once vital, but now collapsed, fishery in the San Lorenzo River.

"The message I would like to get out there is that we're not trying to do something to stop people from doing fun things. I do not like to regulate people. I like to protect a resource,"



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

The Ben Lomond dam has been installed each summer since 1946 to provide recreation and a supply of water for fighting fires.

Rutten said.

The Ben Lomond Dam was installed in its present site in 1946 by the Ben Lomond Fire Department to provide water for fighting fires.

The flashboard dam is in place from Memorial Day to Labor Day. The summer swimming hole has been the traditional focus of town

events from floating parades to log rolling and is used as a back-up water supply by volunteer firefighters.

The adjacent Ben Lomond Park fronting the dam was built by volunteers of the Ben Lomond Business Association.

"That dam is pretty crucial to the summer-

time activity of Ben Lomond," said Paul Ramm, president of the Ben Lomond Business Association and a volunteer firefighter.

Federal officials said although the peak of the fish migration occurs when the dam is not up, it may interfere with the tail end of both the upstream and downstream spring migrations

of the juvenile fish and adult steelhead.

"The main thrust of the fish may have moved downstream, but you're still having fish that are moving," Rutten said.

Rutten also said the dam's fish passages, designed to allow the downstream migration, are inadequate.

Ponded water may harm upstream rearing habitat among the riffles, or tumbling water areas, he said.

Rutten said county officials have several options: Discontinue the dam, try to modify it with a fish ladder bypass, or risk a \$27,000 fine per fish harmed.

He said modifying the dam would be "possible, but it would be very expensive."

While the federal approach might seem hard-nosed, Rutten said it was justified.

"We have a serious situation here," he said. "What we're trying to do is attempt to reverse these human-caused impacts" for the fish.

San Lorenzo Valley Supervisor Jeff Almquist isn't convinced the dam closure is necessary. He maintains studies used by federal officials are inadequate and not based on the San Lorenzo River. Almquist also contends benefits of the dam to young fish weren't taken into consideration.

"I'd be interested in hearing a much fuller discussion of water and biology," Almquist said. "I don't think this is necessarily good science."

"There are a lot of residents in Ben Lomond who fished the river when there were tons of fish even with the dam. How do you demonstrate the dam is the problem if you had the dam and lots of fish?"

The dam will be discussed at the county Parks and Recreation Commission meeting at 7 p.m. Monday at the Highlands Park Senior Center. Almquist is urging residents to attend. Representatives of the National Marine Fisheries Service will be available to answer questions.

Contact Robin Musitelli
at rmusitelli@santa-cruz.com.