

## Fish + Fishing Steelhead, salmon swim for the sea

### Volunteers mark, release native fish in streams

By JOHN ROBINSON  
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SWANTON — As the man snipped the fin off a tiny steelhead, and let it slip back into the sheltering darkness of a pool below, he looked up satisfied, happy to be helping.

"I'm doing this because I want my kids to be able to catch fish — like I once did — without having to drive somewhere for nine hours, like I do now," the father said.

"You mean you want to catch the fish too," a man next to him said.

"No," the father said. "I just want my kids to be able to."

The father, Paul Neumeister of Mountain View, was one of about 70 volunteers who showed up at the Big Creek Fish Hatchery Wednesday night to mark more than 25,000 young steelhead that will soon be released into local streams.

The fin clipping is done by the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project, a group which is battling to save local species of coho salmon and steelhead from extinction.

By clipping the fins, project workers can keep track of how many non-hatchery fish return to local streams compared to the marked fish — and gauge their success. The more unmarked fish found over the years, the greater the project's success; the fish are breeding in the wild.

"What we're trying to do is reestablish a native population back into the all of the streams," said Dave Streig, fish biologist and hatchery manager.

This year the Salmon and Trout project has raised about 30,000 native coho salmon smolt for release into Scott Creek and the San Lorenzo River, and about 25,000 steelhead.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Dorothy Zinky and Karen Trap clip fins on salmon smolt to mark them as hatchery-raised fish, not bred in the wild.

Most of the fish, smolts about four to eight inches long, will be released over the next two months, to make their way to the ocean and become adults. If the project is lucky, a couple dozen salmon may return in three years to spawn in

local streams. Several hundred steelhead could return.

If unlucky, none may return, and the fight to save the fish could be lost.

"Last year was our big year," Streig said. "We had 17 native (co-

ho) females that we spawned and that number if not more, that spawned naturally in the creek."

The thousands of smolt awaiting release are the result of that spawn, and bode well for the future — if conditions are good.

This year, however, the numbers of returning salmon are way down.

"So far it's zip, there's just not enough rain," Streig said. "We've gotten two males and one female. Some are getting through but there is just not enough water for them

to get upstream."

For the past 10 years the salmon and trout project has waged a difficult fight to reestablish the salmon in local streams. Years of drought, poor ocean conditions, disease, heavy fishing and other factors have caused a once common fish to become almost extinct in local waters.

So few native cohos are left that the county Fish and Game Commission is seeking to have the salmon placed on state and federal endangered species lists. The requests are under consideration, and the state should decide within three months, the federal government by April, whether to list the fish.

Steelhead have fared better, but not by much. Their numbers are plummeting in local streams despite the efforts of the hatchery and project.

Despite the difficulties, hatchery workers and others are optimistic that the native strains can be saved.

Last year, the Big Creek hatchery began an experiment designed to wipe out bacterial kidney disease, believed to be a major cause of salmon mortality. By injecting the female fish prior to spawning with erythromycin, an antibiotic commonly prescribed to humans, the bacteria has been almost eradicated in the current hatchery smolt, Streig said.

"We are also getting a fertility rate of twice that of other hatcheries," Streig said. "If we can get the disease under control we will have a much better shot."

Dozens of workers gathered around tables Wednesday night, their scissors flashing like lures as they marked fish. They talked, laughed and dreamed of streams full of fish.

"My father used to fish a lot and I feel a connection," said Sharron Walker, a teacher from Pacifica whose students help raise salmon smolt in a school project. "With the students it brings them an awareness of the whole environment."