

SAVING STEELHEAD



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Bruce Newhall of the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project holds the spout as thousands of steelhead are released into the San Lorenzo River on Tuesday.

Local trout run gets boost from hatchery

Fish & Fishing

By KURTIS ALEXANDER

kalexander@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — The Ford F-450 slowly backed up to the river.

The diesel engine revved as the tires dug for traction in the soft sand and, above, the flat bed of the truck shuddered beneath the weight of a small aquarium.

"Ready?" said one man. "Ready," responded another.

With that, thousands of young steelhead trout shot from the tank on the back of the truck through a long hose to their new home in the San Lorenzo River.

The delivery, made Tuesday, was just one of many this week that will push the number of new fish entering the San Lorenzo to 50,000, plus another 4,800 released in the North Coast's Scott Creek.

The introduction of the juveniles by the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project is the latest effort to sustain the dwindling numbers of steelhead along the Central Coast.

"We shouldn't just look the other way and let them die off," said Al Smith, chair of the board for the Salmon and Trout Project who helped organize this week's fish planting. "These fish are one of nature's gifts. They're beautiful animals."

Decades ago the San Lorenzo River hosted one of California's biggest runs of steelhead, with upward of 10,000 fish spawning in the river each year. Today, only 1,000 or so are thought to return and breed.



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Newly released steelhead swim in the San Lorenzo River near Paradise Park.

The biggest reason for their decline, fishery biologists say, is stream disturbance — be it dams in the creeks or development along the banks — which results in less water and less hospitable conditions for the fish to breed.

The fish released into the San Lorenzo River this week come from the Salmon and Trout Project hatchery in Swanton, which rears steelhead as well as coho salmon.

To make sure the fish aren't any different than their wild counterparts, a common criticism of hatchery efforts, the juveniles are bred from native fish and the DNA of the parents is screened to maximize genetic variability and strengthen the offspring.

"We're really trying not to

STEELHEAD

Steelhead are the anadromous form of rainbow trout, meaning they're born in streams and migrate to the ocean as adults. After two or three years at sea, steelhead return to freshwater streams to spawn. Steelhead can reach up to 55 pounds and 45 inches in length, though average size is much smaller. They are found in streams along the entire Pacific Coast, but their numbers have fallen dramatically over the past 40 years. Steelhead are listed as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

SOURCES: California Fish and Game, National Marine Fisheries

SEE STEELHEAD ON A2

STEELHEAD

Continued from A1

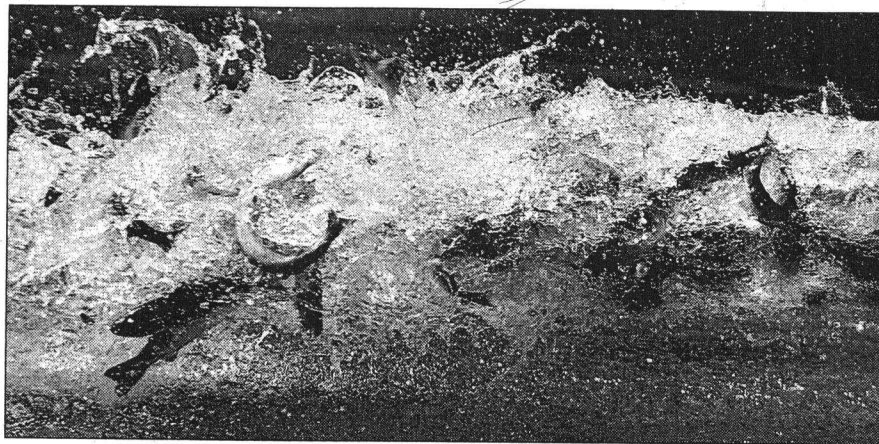
influence the genetics," said Dave Streig, who has managed the Swanton hatchery for more than three decades.

Of the steelhead released into the San Lorenzo this week, only 2 percent are likely to live long enough to spawn, according to Streig, just enough to help preserve the current population.

Streig and others agree fish planting alone won't save the steelhead.

"These hatcheries are a technological short-term fix, but they don't get at the underlying problem of the habitats these fish need," said John Ambrose, a biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service, which is responsible for overseeing protected fish like the steelhead.

County environmental officials say



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Steelhead are released into the San Lorenzo River on Tuesday.

a number of longer-term efforts are in place to enhance water conditions, including water conservation programs to keep as much water in the rivers as possible, dam removal and

erosion-control projects.

As the habitat improves, says John Ricker with county Environmental Health Services, so will the river's ability to sustain a rising number of steelhead.