

# Pajaro River wildlife not what it could be

By NANCY BARR

The wildlife in the Pajaro River system needs a little help.

That's the conclusion of a recent study, which outlines ways to improve the habitat of the river system. The study was presented to and approved by the board of directors of the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG) Wednesday.

The Pajaro River Habitat Management Study, prepared by two consulting firms for AMBAG, focused on steelhead trout, which are native to the Pajaro River system and are more sensitive than other kinds of wildlife to the varying quality of the habitat. If steelhead are doing well, other fish and wildlife will also do well in the river, streams and creeks, authorities said.

"The Pajaro River and associated tributaries once were important waterways for anadromous fish (fish that travel up rivers to spawn) including steelhead trout and silver salmon," the report says. "Now, spawning and nursery habitat have been reduced, and only a much smaller population of steelhead continues to utilize the river system."

The habitat has been degraded by construction, agriculture, dams, flood control measures and erosion, the study concludes.

The study was begun in 1981 and upon its completion earlier this year a draft of the results was distributed to the agencies responsible for maintaining at least some part of the system. Those agencies include water districts and city and county governments in Santa Cruz, San Benito, Monterey and Santa Clara counties.

Comments submitted by those agencies will be included in the final report now being compiled, according to Julie Brandlin, who oversaw the study for AMBAG.

Consultant Jerry Smith outlined for the AMBAG board some of the problem areas in the Pajaro River system, such as in the upper river system in Santa Clara County, where some of the pools of water are too warm for steelhead.

"As the temperature goes up, the fish move into faster water," Smith said. The fast-water sections of the streams and creeks need to be "beefed up," he said, because the fast-running water is essential to the fish and yet passage in some of those areas is blocked.

Smith showed the board slides of culverts the fish must jump into to continue their trek upstream. Some of the culverts are too high, he said; others have fish ladders next to them, but some of the ladders were damaged in the storms of recent years and have not been repaired, he said.

Also discussed was the erosion in sections of the river system, such as in Corralitos and Rider creeks.

"The severe erosion in the last eight years (as a result of) development has ruined the habitat downstream," Smith said.

The report offers suggestions to the approximately 100 agencies that have jurisdiction over parts of the Pajaro River system. For instance, the Gaviilan Water District in Santa Clara County was told it could improve the fish runs by releasing water from its reservoirs at times when that would be most beneficial to the steelhead.