

Trout project imperiled by budget cuts

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SANTA CRUZ — State budget cuts are threatening the future of a non-profit group trying to restore native fish runs on the Central Coast, and the quality and number of fish the group plants.

The Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project had \$35,000 cut this year by the state Department of Fish and Game. In years past the project received about \$70,000 from the state, which represents 80 percent of its budget, said Dave Streig, fish hatchery manager and fisheries biologist for the project.

The shortfall forced the project to close its Scotts Valley fish-raising facility. The group's Big Creek hatchery remains open.

When combined with poor returns of coho salmon this year, the missing money likely will force the project to cut in half the number of fish planted in area streams next year.

In the long run, that will mean fewer steelhead and salmon in Central Coast streams, said Matt McCaslin, salmon and trout project education coordinator.

"We're really hurting," McCaslin said of the project's finances.

The fish soon may be hurting, too.

"Down the road, at some point, yeah. There will be less adult fish coming back as a result of that," McCaslin said.

More than half of the fish returning to area streams in the spring are planted fish, project workers said.

"We have seen an increase in the number of returning adults. Not to the extent we think we should see them, but there are a fair number out there," Streig

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Fish project

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said.

Fish and Game funded the project's programs based on the type of fish it planted. Funding for steelhead has been cut by Fish and Game, the species the project is raising the most of this year, Streig said.

The state would provide the project with money to plant coho salmon, a candidate for the federal endangered list, but the project won't be raising any of the salmon this year because of an egg shortage.

About 5,000 coho salmon smolts were planted in Waddell Creek in March, but no mature female fish were collected or even observed in area streams, Streig said. Fewer than 2 percent of the planted fish ever return to spawn, project workers said.

McCaslin said 1,400 coho salmon were withheld from that plant and were set to be planted next year to

fill the void caused by egg shortages, but equipment to cool storage pool water to slow the coho's growth was too expensive, he said. They were released in a second planting.

In busy years, as many as 160,000 fish were planted including steelhead, coho and Chinook salmon, Streig said.

Donors will be financing the fish raising and planting activities in the coming months, McCaslin said. Santa Cruz and Monterey counties, Chevron USA Inc., commercial fishermen and the 370 or so project members have all made donations, McCaslin said.

McCaslin said the project will be seeking donors to set up an endowment fund to finance future work. "At this point, we don't have any solid funding to carry us beyond even early next year," McCaslin said.