

# Endangered fish stalls river work

By **BRIAN SEALS**

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

As crews worked on refurbishing a portion of the San Lorenzo River levee this week, they got a big, or maybe little, surprise — a creature known as the tidewater goby.

Officials believe this may be the first-ever sighting of the endangered fish in the San Lorenzo. The discovery is a biological gem but a construction obstacle.

Crews have had to stop work while the contractor and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on how to proceed.

The tidewater goby is a small fish that rarely exceeds two inches in length. It is unique to California and found in coastal lagoons.

While another listed species, steelhead, is widely known to live in the oft-studied river, the discovery of the less famous tidewater goby was unexpected. Biologists say the discovery bodes well for the health of the river.

"Any time a new species is seen in an urban system, it's great," said Gary Kittleson, a biologist who monitors work on the river for the city.

The fish was listed as endan-

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GARY KITTLESON, BIOLOGIST

gered in 1994. It was once found more abundantly in coastal streams in California and its demise was credited to what has felled so many coastal species, development pressure and channeled riverways.

Biologists discovered 11 of the small fish as crews worked on a \$5.5 million project to stabilize 900 feet of riverbank near the Laurel Street Extension and Third Street.

Workers were installing a temporary dam so water could be diverted to create a dryer place to work, using nets to direct the fish to the water and away from the dry area.

Just how long work on the project will be delayed remains to be seen.

"At this point, it's just a small delay," said Eli Mowbray, engineer in the city Public Works Department. "The ball is still up in the air."

The Wildlife Service will consult with the Army Corps about the project and then issue a bio-

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Contributed photo

The tidewater goby could be a biologist's gem, but it is also an obstacle in the refurbishing of the San Lorenzo River levee.

## Fish

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logical assessment expected to include requirements and conditions to ease any harm to the newly found river residents.

The maximum amount of time that will take is 135 days, said Roger Root, biologist with the Wildlife Service in Ventura, but officials said they hope to complete an assessment sooner.

"It's a high priority, but we don't have a hard estimate on time," Root said.

As planned the project will include a new 900-foot wall along the bank as well as adding riverbank vegetation. On land, the project would improve a bike path that runs through the area and build a river viewing plaza.

Granite Construction is the contractor for the work.

That work is the final phase of a longtime levee effort.

Contact Brian Seals at [bseals@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:bseals@santacruzsentinel.com).