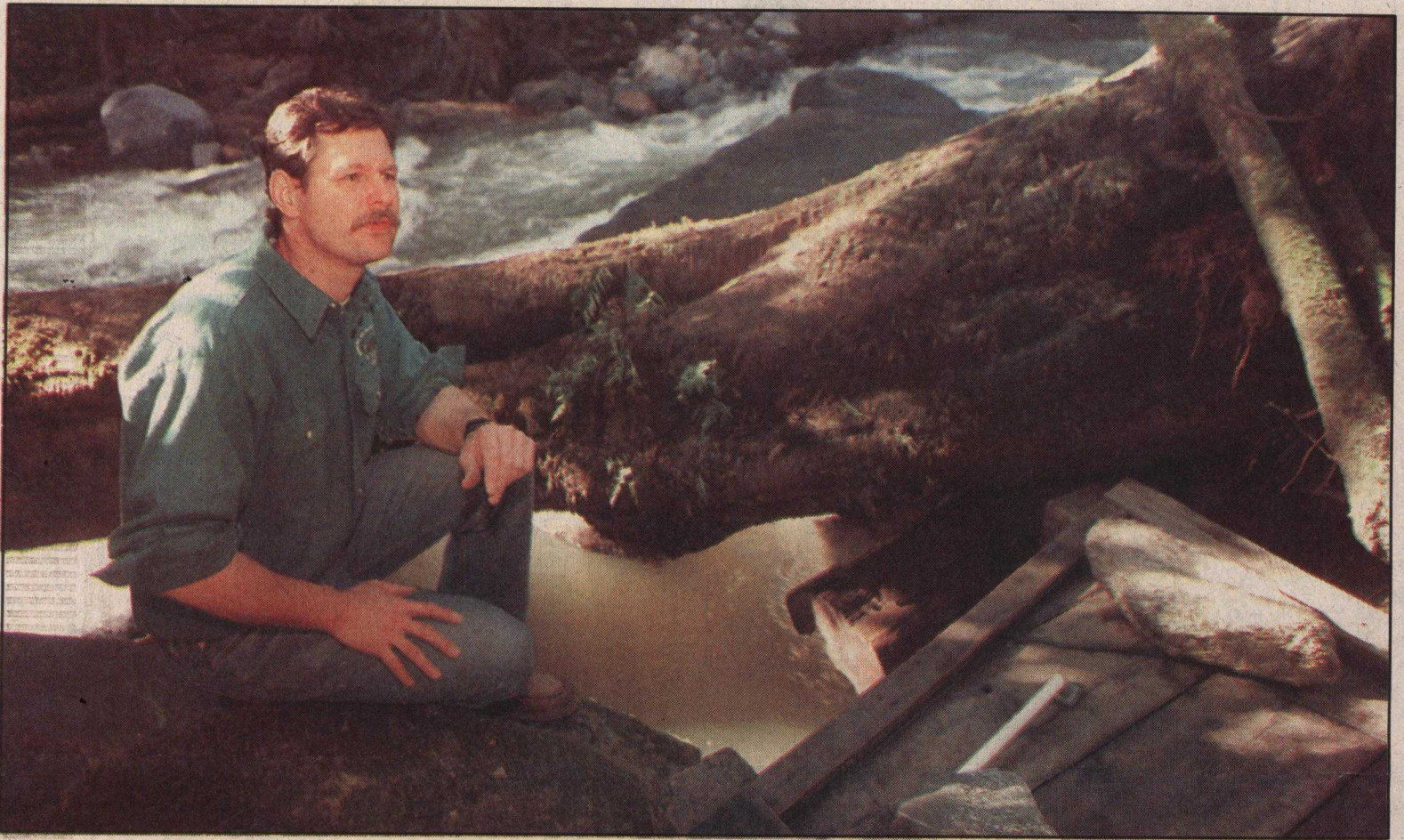


Steelhead efforts a wash

60,000 young fish die when storms cut off hatchery



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Matt McCaslin surveys damage at an intake on Big Creek that was clogged by a large tree and rocks.

By **DONNA KIMURA**
Sentinel staff writer

SWANTON

WEEKS AWAY from being released into the wild, 60,000 steelhead trout were killed when water and power were knocked out at the Monterey Bay Salmon & Trout Project.

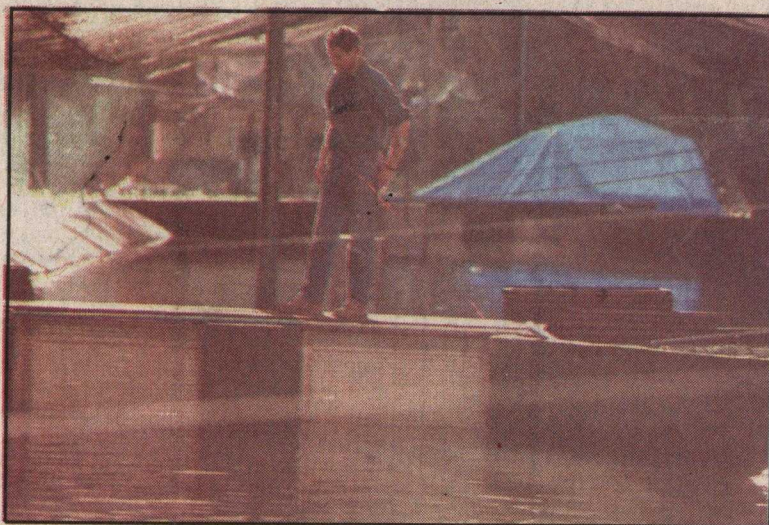
It's a sad setback for a threatened species, and for the people trying to help the fish make a comeback in the coastal streams of Santa Cruz County.

The loss will be felt years from now, in 2001 and 2002, when this year's release would have returned to spawn, to sustain the species in local waters.

Instead, fishermen and others who visit the rivers will likely find few fish in the streams, which will still be feeling the effects of this year's storms.

"It's the largest fish loss we have ever had," said Matt McCaslin, chairman of the nonprofit organization that has been working to restore native salmon and steelhead populations since 1976.

Over the years, the project has released more than 1.6 million coho salmon and steelhead trout into area streams.



McCaslin walks above a rearing tank that in most years would teem with yearlings, but not this year.

In addition to the loss of the steelhead that were to be released this year, the project's hatchery on the banks of Big Creek in Swanton sustained serious damage during February's storms.

Two large pools were damaged, a third was swept away. The rushing stream knocked out a section of a dam that provided

water to the hatchery. A trailer that transported fish to release sites was hit by a tree.

The destruction likely will equal, perhaps exceed, the group's annual budget of \$60,000. Project officials said it is unlikely they would be eligible for federal disaster relief.

It's a major blow to the group, which must rely on volunteers

and donations to rebuild not only its facilities, but nature's fragile species.

"We're liable to have more problems up here if we get more rain," McCaslin said.

A number of slides and fallen trees can be seen around the hatchery. The project has had its hatchery and rearing facility, built by volunteer labor, in Swanton since 1982. The site was previously home to a state hatchery, which was devastated by a flood in 1940.

This year's troubles came with the heavy rains that fell the night of Feb. 2. Project officials struggled to get to the remote hatchery, but fallen trees and power lines blocked them.

Debris or crushed rocks plugged all three water intake systems.

"Every one of our systems got hammered," McCaslin said.

The next morning, the hatchery's manager and fisheries biologist Dave Streig made it through to find that water and aeration systems were out. The facility is equipped with generators, but someone must start them. Since no one could get to the hatchery,

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the aeration systems likely were out for as long as eight or 10 hours, too long for most of the young steelhead to survive.

A few thousand of the fish, however, survived. They were released into the wild in a last-ditch effort to save them, McCaslin said.

Still, about 40,000 fish destined for release in the San Lorenzo River died. Another 20,000 that were going into Scott Creek also were killed.

Streig managed to save the 12 adult coho salmon, another struggling species, that were in the hatchery. Project officials had captured these adults when they returned to spawn in December and January.

Coho salmon and steelhead trout hatch in gravel beds in creeks and streams. After a few years, they head out to live in the ocean, and return to the streams to spawn.

It had looked like a strong year for the returning coho, McCaslin said, noting that about 150, a mix of wild and hatchery fish, had been spotted returning to Scott Creek. Federal officials have said that fewer than 6,000 coho are returning annually to spawn in streams from Northern California to Santa Cruz, an area that traditionally supported 50,000 to 125,000 coho.

The storm was cruel not only to the fish in the hatchery, but to wild fish as well. McCaslin said nearly all the eggs laid in the river were washed out by the high waters.

"For 2000-2001, those coho runs will be reduced because of what happened," he said.

While the eggs in the wild are gone, hatchery officials worked to do what they can to produce coho in 1998.

This week, the project took an estimated 2,000 eggs from the adult cohos they had. The fish

hatched from these eggs will be released in March 1999.

The hatchery's six adult steelhead also were saved. They too were spawned this week, resulting in about 30,000 eggs.

Steelhead usually return to the streams a little later than coho, so there is a chance that some may still return to spawn.

The steelhead sportfishing season ends today. A low number of returning fish in December and January and the pounding rains in February made for a poor season, according to McCaslin.

Only time will tell the long-term effects of this year's losses.

"These are the fish that help replenish the streams," McCaslin said.

Tax-deductible donations can be sent to the Monterey Bay Salmon & Trout Project, 825 Big Creek Road, Davenport, Calif. 95017. To be a volunteer or for more information call 458-3095.