

Something fishy on North Coast

1,800 coho fry released into stream

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Sentinel staff writer

NORTH COAST — Filled with unbridled conviction in the power of nature, believers in the coho salmon set loose 1,800 fry into the wild Wednesday afternoon.

It was the first time that fish so young and so small were released into the waters of Waddell Creek.

"I think they will do just fine," said Matt McCaslin, a board director of the Monterey Bay Salmon & Trout Project, after the last of the tiny coho swam away.

The fry had been spawned at the project's hatchery from about 18 females and fertilized by dozens of different males to ensure a good genetic mix.

They had been treated for bacterial kidney disease, a devastating illness for the coho in the wild.

They were set loose at a half-dozen points along the creek.

"The applause meter is high, Matt," said Larry Wolf, a director with the project, as he watched a school of fry swim away.

McCaslin had done his job.

There was nothing left to do but offer a wish for the best and hope that the fish return to the stream two or three years from now.

The coho are expected to stay in Waddell Creek for a year. Next spring under the cover of night, they will head for the Pacific Ocean. After two or three years at sea, these fish that live by strict patterns should come back to this gentle stream to spawn.

In the past, the salmon project has released coho smolt, which are about 15-month-old fish, into area creeks in an effort to aid species recovery.

The fish released Wednesday were

two months old and about two inches long. Officials hope that by releasing fish at a younger age, the chances of their return to the creek to spawn are greater.

McCaslin and a handful of volunteers also released 5,000 fish into Gazos Creek in San Mateo County.

They will release about 1,800 fry today into Scott Creek.

It was a 10-year struggle to get to this point, said Dave Hope, senior resource planner for Santa Cruz County. It took that long to persuade various state officials to allow the release of the younger fish.

Fry were set loose in a stretch of creek running through the depths of Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

The work, Hope said, is pretty much an emergency measure for coho rehabilitation. The fish population depends on the year, but can vary from zero to about 200, he said.

"Coho are pretty much like gold," McCaslin said. "There are not too many around."

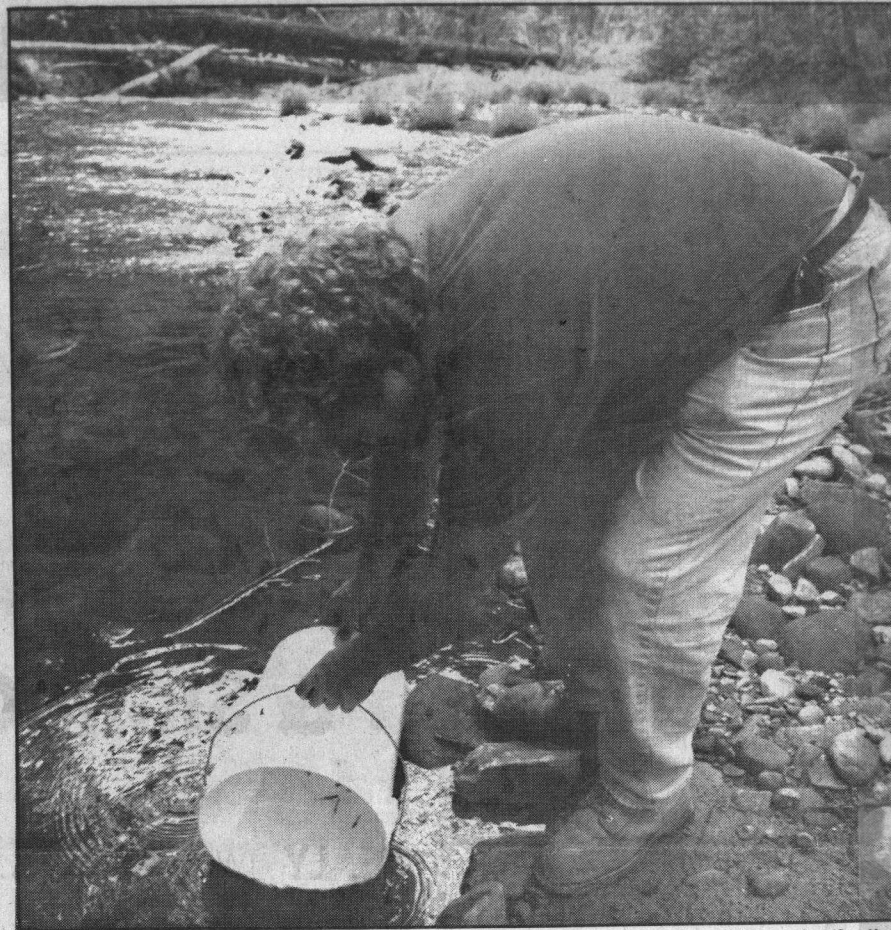
A native of Santa Cruz, he grew up traveling the streams and fishing with his father.

Like the fish it is trying to rehabilitate, the salmon and trout program faces an uphill battle. It recently lost \$52,000 to state budget cuts.

"It was pretty devastating," McCaslin said, adding that the project faces an uncertain future. In the meantime, volunteers have several fund-raising events planned including a salmon derby in July.

The fry release was a cooperative effort of the project, the state Department of Fish and Game and Santa Cruz County.

During the afternoon, the group of people aiding in the release descend



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Dave Hope finds a quiet eddy in which to release coho fry Wednesday.

down a hillside not far from a field of forget-me-nots and shaded by giant redwoods.

There, they find a side channel rapidly drying out in the warm weather. Numerous steelhead fish about the same size of the coho that are being released are swimming in the shallow water.

Worried that the steelhead could get trapped in the channel, Jennifer Nelson, fishery biologist for Fish and Game, carefully moves several rocks to create a path to the creek.

The volunteers then take time to watch the young steelhead. They take it as a good sign for the steelhead and

the coho they just released.

"Does it do your heart good, Dave?" one man asked.

"I love it," Hope said. "Go, baby, go."

The project will also host its fund-raising salmon derby July 5-7 at seven locations in Monterey Bay. Tickets should be on sale soon at local tackle dealers or by calling 689-0857.

To support further efforts of the Salmon & Trout Project, volunteers and donations are needed. For more information, call 458-3095.

Animals

REFERENCE