

# Big trout plant set for March in Pajaro River

By NANCY SCHACHTER

Thousands of steelhead trout will be planted in the Pajaro River in March, which will be a boost for local fishermen if the fish survive four years to maturity.

The Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project expects to plant some 126,000 steelhead and 18,000 silver salmon in rivers and streams in the Monterey Bay area. The salmon will all be placed in the San Lorenzo River, and the steelhead will be distributed among the San Lorenzo, Pajaro and Carmel rivers and most of the streams in the area, including Aptos and Soquel creeks, but exactly where they will be planted is a closely held secret, according to fish culturist Dave Streig.

The fish will be planted after the steelhead season ends at the end of February, and these fish won't be mature enough to be caught for another four years, Streig said. The steelhead and salmon normally spend two years in the streams, then go out into the ocean, and return to their "parent" stream three years later to spawn.

But by raising the fish in a somewhat controlled environment, the project effectively cuts one year off the time the fish spend in the stream before heading out to the ocean, Streig said.

Because there's a limit to the food available in rivers and streams, the food the fish eat and store in their bodies while in the controlled environment increases their chances of survival. Says Streig: "We can provide them with the food they need. Basically we're just assisting nature, trying to build up the runs."

The Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project has spent the last few years raising fish provided by the state Department of Fish and Game. Now the project has its own incubators, and by next summer Streig expects to have a fully equipped fish hatchery at the project's headquarters on Big Creek north of Davenport.

The Salmon and Trout Project was established in 1976 to stock area rivers and streams with

fish hatched by the Department of Fish and Game. The rivers and streams need to be stocked because siltation and decreased water flow have led to a drastic decrease in the natural fish population. Development pressures and reduced stream flows during the 1975-77 drought, which kept fish from running upstream to spawn, are among the reasons cited.

The project has concentrated on replenishing the fish supply, but has not been involved in restoring the fish habitat. Nor has the project researched whether the fish survive after they are planted in area rivers and streams. It would be possible to conduct a study to determine approximately how many fish survive, but the project doesn't have the resources to put into such an evaluation, according to Marine Adviser Ed Melvin of UC Extension, who works with the Salmon and Trout Project.

"Their approach cannot be said to be bad or even the wrong approach," Melvin said of the project's planting of fish without improving the habitats. He added that planting fish can't hurt anything, even if it turns out not many of the fish survive in the local rivers and streams.

"The project is starting to think more about stream restoration work," said Melvin, but he said the project is limited in what it can do because it is made up of volunteers who have little time to do anything other than raise and plant fish. The chairman of the board of directors of the Salmon and Trout Project agreed with Melvin.

"It's taken all our effort so far to raise and plant the fish. It's really time-consuming," said chairman Jack Harrell. Fishermen's associations in the area have done some restoration work, he said, and eventually he'd like to see the project get involved in improving the fish habitat in local streams and rivers.

But in the meantime, the project will continue to hatch, raise and plant fish in the hope that enough will survive on their own to improve the local fishery.