

\$60 million cost for fish passage has district reeling

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SANTA PAULA, Calif. - The \$60 million price tag for a new fish passage on the Santa Clara River has local water managers reeling — and not with rods and lines.

The sum is only part of what will be spent in coming years to keep water flowing to area farmers and cities while also restoring habitat for endangered steelhead trout. In all, hundreds of millions of dollars are expected to go to efforts that either directly benefit the fish or create replacement supplies for river water that will be sent to the ocean rather than used for irrigation or drinking.

The agency footing much of the bill, meanwhile — the United Water Conservation District — has an average annual budget of roughly \$20 million. Its members include growers and cities from Lake Piru to the coastal edge of the Oxnard Plain. All will see costs rise in the future to pay for such projects.



The scenario has been brewing for years but is taking firmer shape now as United draws up plans to comply with federal Endangered Species Act requirements.

Last week, when a National Marine Fisheries Service official addressed United's board on the issue, a crowd packed the meeting room at the district's Santa Paula headquarters. The fisheries service, part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, is working with United on plans for the estimated \$60 million fish passage at the district's Freeman Diversion Dam near Saticoy.

Anthony Spina, who supervises the fisheries service's Southern California branch, told attendees the Freeman dam is "a key item" in the river's lower watershed that is of "exceedingly high priority" for his agency.

"It is the first structure steelhead come to when attempting to migrate," Spina said. The fish can travel from rivers to the ocean, returning as adults to native streams to spawn.

United built the Freeman dam in 1991, before Southern California steelhead were declared endangered in 1997. The \$31 million facility already has a fish ladder, but the original \$1.3 million structure was later found deficient. The diversion dam channels Santa Clara River flows to facilities that replenish groundwater later pumped from the Oxnard Plain.

Lynn Maulhardt, United's board president, brought up concerns of district growers that construction of a costly new fish passage could be done with some certainty.

"We have a structure that was permitted that now is lost," Maulhardt said, referring to the original fish ladder.

He and other board members brought up lingering concerns about the actual size of historic fish runs. For decades, the river was stocked with hatchery fish to lure sport fisherman to the area. The district in 2008 compiled a 738-page record of trout-related newspaper clippings from 1870 to the mid-1950s that documents such stocking efforts. While the district's official position now is that steelhead historically lived in the river and still occur there, many of its members from longtime farming families in the area remain skeptical.

"Behind the scenes, these are issues we deal with," Maulhardt told Spina, after listing hundreds of millions of dollars worth of projects the district faces. "I want you to know that."

"We get it," Spina replied.

Maulhardt also stressed that United would build the fish passage and comply with the law.

Mark Capelli, a scientist with the fisheries service who coordinates regional steelhead recovery, said this week concerns over estimates of historic fish runs are misplaced. Recovery efforts aren't an attempt to meet old, unreliable numbers. Rather, a complex plan for territory from Santa Barbara County to the state's southern boundary aims to create systems where diverse subgroups can thrive and ultimately allow the species to survive long term.

"We're not trying to restore historic conditions," Capelli said. "We're trying to make sure the fish are viable."

United's steelhead history:

http://www.unitedwater.org/images/stories/Resource-Conservation/Freeman-Diversion/Scientific_and_Historical_Accounts-Vol_I.pdf

National Marine Fisheries Service steelhead recovery plan page:

http://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected_species/salmon_steelhead/recovery_planning_and_implementation/south_central_southern_california_coast/south_central_southern_california_coast_recovery_plan_documents.html

If all goes well, construction of the fish passage could start in 2019 after a lengthy permitting process. The experimental structure now being developed will require building a large model to scale for extensive testing in a Washington warehouse.

John Krist, CEO of the Farm Bureau of Ventura County, was at the meeting with Spina. He said afterward growers in the county's \$2 billion agriculture industry want to make sure an "extremely costly fish passage" won't be deemed insufficient in a few years, as happened before.

“They’re not happy to pay more for less water from a project that’s been in the ground for decades,” Krist said of the Freeman dam. “That’s just hard for a lot of people to swallow.”