

Gazette Article

Steelhead Beach

By Brenda Adelman

8-8-08

The name of the park, Steelhead Beach, conjures up visions of fishermen crowding the beaches in anticipation of their catch. Steelhead runs were legend on the Russian River and are all but gone now. And so are most of the fishermen. No longer do you see the river crowded with men (and some women) in hip boots, throwing their long lines into the running waters, hoping to snag a beautiful fish that they knew were just waiting for them. Fish stories were abundant prior to the 1990's at King's Bait and Tackle, and Pat's Restaurant nearby. But times have changed.

How ironic. For years fishermen and recreationists clamored for more public river access, since about 90% of the access is privately owned. Yet about two years after the park opened (around 1997), Steelhead trout populations were declared threatened by the National Marine Fishery Service (NMFS). That happened about the same time that Santa Rosa and Rohnert Park grew by leaps and bounds, along with their water demands and their wastewater discharge needs, and new wineries burgeoned like mushrooms.

Steelhead Beach sits at a critical location in the river, right where the middle reach turns west towards the ocean and immediately downstream of the convergence with the Laguna de Santa Rosa and Mark West Creek. These latter two waterways represent hundreds of miles of drainage area that is lately polluted by nutrients, sediment, bacteria, and in some cases, Mercury. It suffers from temperature and dissolved oxygen problems as well. The blame can be placed on agricultural practices, urban runoff, and the massive growth taking place in the last 25 years.

As we have mentioned in prior articles, the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) and the Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) manage releases from the two dams at Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma. The State Water Resources Control Board is supposed to manage stream flows and water rights permits. Yet there are about 1700 pending permit applications requesting new water rights in the Russian River and its tributaries. People wait years to get their permits, and, when they don't come, in frustration often take water illegally. The State Board is currently developing a policy to remedy the problem, but it has a long way to go before it is acceptable to all interested parties and insulated from litigation.

There's a lot of water cheating going on out there and no one's keeping track of it. You also have the growing populations in Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park and six other urban water districts vying for more supplies. (A new environmental impact report on SCWA's water rights expansion is due out by the end of this

year. Stay tuned for that also.) And then the NMFS, in their oversight of the Endangered Species Act for three threatened fish species, says that there is too much water in the lower river. They are especially concerned about closing the estuary and are pushing to permanently and significantly lower flows downstream, far below current levels (almost too low for recreation now).

To add to the complexity, SCWA wants ACOE to hold back more water in the early spring, but ACOE is concerned about possible late spring flooding. They also expressed concern recently about the ability of the dam to hold more water. Coyote Dam needs repairs folks; it's more than 50 years old.

So along comes Santa Rosa wanting to build a huge discharge facility at a cherished river access location (Steelhead Beach) in order to continue dumping on the lower river. (My article last month, which you can view at the WCG website, describes all the reasons why Santa Rosa doesn't need this project!) At the same time, City officials are fighting for a Basin Plan Amendment that would allow "incidental runoff" from their proposed summer urban irrigation project, at a time when the creeks can't assimilate any additional pollutants and during the time of highest recreational use.

City consultants are currently preparing responses to comments on the environmental document that includes the proposed Steelhead Beach wastewater discharge project. When those are complete, probably in the late fall, the City will certify the EIR and then begin their project selection process. They are also looking at possible discharges at Healdsburg and the Laguna. We don't think they should select the Healdsburg discharge either and ONLY discharge into the Laguna during extreme wet periods. There are other remedies they can pursue to get rid of excessive wastewater.

Russian River Watershed Protection Committee (RRWPC), with Vesta's help, is developing a brochure on this issue and planning a petition. We are putting together a committee to work on stopping this proposal. We plan to have materials available at the Forestville Expo on August 21st if you see this announcement in time, come on down.

If you want to join our effort in collecting signatures and publicizing this issue, please contact me at rrwpc-1@comcast.net or write RRWPC at P.O. Box 501, Guerneville, CA 95446. We can also use financial help if you would rather write a check. Just make it out to RRWPC and send to the Guerneville address.