

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



OUR 149TH YEAR

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2005

Steelhead fans champion habitat plan

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The latest move in an effort to make local waterways more hospitable for endangered steelhead got an airing Tuesday evening in Santa Barbara.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has proposed designating 12,000 miles of rivers in the state as critical habitat for the fish, whose passage to spawning grounds is blocked by hundreds of barriers.

The proposal includes the Santa Ynez and Santa Maria rivers and their tributaries, Carpinteria Creek, Mission Creek, the Sisquoc River and Manzanita Creek.

One speaker at Tuesday's hearing presented federal officials with framed pictures of steelhead as a reminder of their importance to

Californians. David Pritchett of the Southern California Steelhead Coalition asked that stream banks — which have vegetation that protects the fish — and estuaries be included in the critical habitat. He also wanted some areas above dams that steelhead don't currently occupy to be added.

Several people wanted more information about how the proposal might affect them.

A representative of Granite Construction, which has facilities on the Santa Ynez River, wondered how the proposal might affect the company's operations and efforts to keep waterways clear of willows.

Critical habitat designations only come into play for activities carried out by the federal government or that require a federal permit.

This latest proposal doesn't

include waterways running through Vandenberg Air Force Base because a federal provision allows such areas to be excluded on the basis of national security. Other areas were set aside because they weren't judged to be particularly important for the fish and the designation would carry significant economic costs.

A representative of Rep. Lois Capps, D-Santa Barbara, read a letter arguing against the cutbacks. She and several others said the economic analysis overstates the negative impacts, but ignores the economic benefits of good steelhead runs — particularly in terms of tourism.

For information on the proposal, go online to <http://swr.nmfs.noaa.gov>. Comments are being accepted through March 14.

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CORRECTION

An article in Wednesday's paper about a hearing on steelhead protections mistakenly attributed comments made by Brian Trautwein of the Environmental Defense Center to David Pritchett.