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## Resuscitating the Steelhead Trout

By [Nick Welsh](#), April 5, 2007

### Can The Endangered Fish Population Be Restored?

Last week, Mark Capelli happily stumbled onto 10 steelhead trout swimming in the lower reaches of Mission Creek near the Ortega Street pedestrian bridge. Of the 10, four looked big enough to have made the steelhead's mysterious and defining trek from spawning waters to



ocean and back again. The biggest — 26 inches long and 4 pounds — was dead, having been skewered by a blue heron nesting nearby. Given the stinginess of this winter's rains, Capelli was inclined to credit last year's abundant precipitation for the presence of creatures on the federal government's threatened and endangered species list.

For Capelli — who drafts the restoration plans for steelhead ranging from the Santa Maria River to the Tijuana River — the timing of this encounter could not have been better, coming just one week before a series of public workshops on restoring the species. The event is hosted by the National Marine Fisheries Service, for which Capelli works. During these workshops, scientists working with Capelli will unveil their plans — 10 years in the making — for bringing the once abundant steelhead back from the brink of extinction. By the end of June, the federal government has promised that Capelli will produce a draft plan that can be released for public consumption. After that, it's anyone's guess whether and when a final action plan is adopted.

As usual, the workshops will provide a battleground for trout

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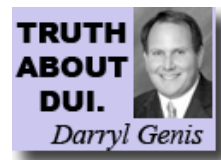
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restoration advocates — like Brian Trautwein with the Environmental Defense Center and Craig Fusaro of CalTrout — to tussle with the legion of water agency administrators, lawyers, and consultants over what accommodations must be made to revive the steelhead, whose numbers from Santa Maria to the Mexican border have dwindled from a historic high of 75,000 spawning adults to fewer than 1,000. A pivotal bone of contention between these rival camps is whether restoration plans should encompass spawning grounds and habitats upstream from the dams that have cut the steelhead off from 90 percent of their traditional habitats. Under intense lobbying from water agencies and their experts, the federal government listed as endangered or threatened only those fish populations living below dams. To connect the two habitats in any restoration scheme would require transporting the fish above the dam and then back down again, at considerable cost of both money and water.

Capelli declined to speculate what kind of rhetorical shoot-out he expected during this week's workshops — held Wednesday and Thursday at Ventura City Hall — but he did say that the teams of scientists who studied various restoration scenarios specifically included above-dam habitats in their considerations. Fish advocates expressed alarm when water agency officials sought to gain the inside track with Russ Strach, the new regional director of protected resources at NOAA, by scheduling two days of private meetings with him in Santa Barbara in late January. After objecting to their exclusion, two fish advocates — Trautwein and Fusaro — were allowed to attend the meetings for one of the two days.

Capelli cautioned that the restoration plans will provide a broad framework but leave many questions unresolved — such as how much water is needed to keep certain streams and tributaries flowing and for how long. He also stressed the restoration plans are strictly voluntary and carry no regulatory weight. But the success of such restoration work is essential if the steelhead are to become numerous enough to be removed from the threatened or endangered species list. "A lot of water agencies might prefer to see a plan that's not very ambitious," he said. "And if they get their way, they might have time to contemplate the old Chinese proverb about watching out what you wish for. If they get their way, we won't see much of a response by the fish populations, and failing that, you won't have much of a case for delisting."



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