

Up a Creek with NOAA Fisheries

On a cool crisp morning, Mondy Lariz and I waited in a parking lot with Alice Rich, Fisheries and Ecological Consultant. A white van drove up with government license plates. Gary Stern and Darren Howe from NOAA Fisheries introduced themselves and we headed up a creek, Permanente Creek. A month ago I called Gary with the proposal to remove a massive fish barrier, the 1.3 miles concrete Permanente Diversion Channel. Currently, Steelhead Trout swim past this barrier and up Stevens Creek. They can't get too far on Stevens as there is a dam and its flow is controlled by the Water District for flood and supply purposes, not for fish. "I don't want to send fish to their deaths," Gary responded to the idea of allowing Steelhead up Permanente. Gary decided to take a look at Permanente Creek to determine its habitat potential.

Around 9:15am we started walking, up the creek. Gary and Alice were the most experienced and their attire was just the opposite. Gary had full waders, up to his hip. "There won't be any deep pools" we mistakenly said. Alice had shorts and hiking shoes. I soon realized these two extremes were the best alternatives. By the tenth time my knee high utility boots submerged, I stopped taking them off to empty. I copied Darren's technique, just swing your water heavy boot up the creek bank and bend down to empty. Forget about wringing out your socks & pant legs.

We found FISH, most likely resident Trout along with Roach and Suckers. Yes, this creek can sustain fish, as least in these late spring months. "You have a nice little creek here," Gary said several times. Mondy was ecstatic and called several of his fish friends during our hike. We found great habitat for steelhead; refugia, deep pools, only a few minor fish barriers. But several questions need to be answered. We need to look at the flows in the fall. We need to electrofish to identify the species. We need a plan for the minor fish barriers. The sediment increased and the variety of fish decreased as we approached Rancho San Antonio - evidence of Lehigh's discharges into the creek. "It may take years for this sediment to clear up, but the potential here is quite good," Gary thought.

"What are you doing?" asked Mike, the ranger at Rancho San Antonio when we emerged 3.5 hours later. We didn't look like the usual RSA guest with twigs, nettles sticking out from our hats, soaked pants, waders, note pads. "Matt knows we're here," I said apologetically. Mike was very excited about our findings and offered to check flows on the upper West Branch. "You've got a great job," I said to Darren. "Not all days are this much fun," he replied.