

The Schaeffer barrier is one of three barriers constructed on the Kern River to keep non-native trout out of golden trout habitat. Department of Fish and Game

State, U.S. agencies join in an effort to save golden trout

“Our mission is the recovery and protection of these fish, so, hey, if we’ve got a plan that’s going to put us all together where we roll up our sleeves and get busy working, that’s awesome.”

Chuck Bonham
a lawyer for the fish-protection group Trout Unlimited

By Clea Benson
BEE CAPITOL BUREAU

Protected from glaciers 10,000 years ago by the warmth of the Kern basin and then isolated from other fish by waterfalls, the bright-orange-bellied California golden trout evolved into a beautiful little species whose only native habitat stretches through 543 square miles in the Sierra Nevada.

Now, using DNA tests, biologists have determined that California’s official state fish is in danger. Rainbow trout, stocked by humans, have been breeding with the small, golden fish, creating hybrid species. Grazing cattle have compounded the threat by tainting the water where the fish swim.

Genetically pure California golden trout are currently found in only about 18 square miles of their original habitat on the south fork of the Kern River and in Golden Trout Creek.

Hoping to head off an attempt to have the fish declared an endangered species, state and federal officials today plan to sign an agreement to spend \$1.3 million over the next five years on a conservation effort.

The California Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will collect more genetic data on the golden trout and will monitor the fish to make sure the hybrids don’t subsume the pure ones. The agencies will also work to improve water quality in the areas where golden trout live. A public education campaign will teach anglers not to transfer non-native fish into the golden trout habitats.

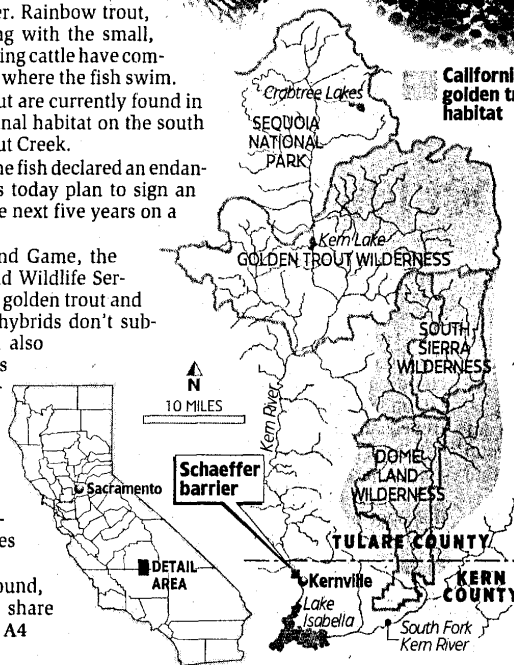
Mike Wintemute, a spokesman for the Department of Fish and Game, said the agencies are trying to avoid the mandates that come with endangered-species listings, such as restrictions on land use.

“There are things we can do on the ground, working together,” he said. “When we share

► TROUT, page A4



California golden trout



California golden trout habitat

STATE FISH California golden trout

- **Species name:** *Oncorhynchus mykiss aguabonita*
- **Characteristics:** Bright gold with bright red to orange markings
- **Length:** 5 to 12 inches
- **Original native habitat:** 453 square miles in the south fork of the Kern River and Golden Trout Creek
- **Amount of native habitat now inhabited by pure golden trout:** 18 square miles

Source: California Department of Fish and Game, Trout Unlimited

Sacramento Bee/Nam Nguyen

1116 of Trout: Species in federally controlled area

► FROM PAGE A3
costs, we can look at doing things proactively.”

The fish preservation group Trout Unlimited filed a petition to have the California golden trout named an endangered species in 2000.

Chuck Bonham, a lawyer for the organization, said the group is pleased with the conservation plan.

“Our mission is the recovery and protection of these fish, so, hey, if we’ve got a plan that’s going to put us all together where we roll up our sleeves and get busy working, that’s awesome,” Bonham said. “We’re planning to attend (the signing) and applaud Fish and Game and the other agencies for finally producing a tangible conservation strat-

egy that seems to have clear funding and a schedule.”

Preserving the California golden trout could be easier than other fish-conservation efforts, Bonham said, because the species occupies such a small habitat, and it’s all on federally controlled land.

Long renowned for its striking appearance, the California golden trout has descendants that appear in lakes and streams all over the state’s mountains, spread by 19th century Californians.

A 90-page conservation plan to be released today quotes Ardis Walker, a resident of Kernville in the early 1900s, who wrote, “Many of the pioneer visitors to golden trout waters reacted with a desire that was almost compul-

sive; they shared a common missionary urge to spread the golden beauty and life of this native habitat to the barren waters of more elevated and more easterly and northerly lakes and streams.”

The early settlers, often carrying the fish in cans of water on mules, stocked thousands of them.

But while many of the current-day fish populations may resemble their California golden trout ancestors, often they are too genetically mixed with other species to be considered pure, scientists say.

Stan Stephens, a state fishery biologist, said the new effort will study the DNA of about 75 groups of fish that appear to be California golden trout. If any

are pure, he said, they could be preserved in refuges.

Other California golden trout populations, such as the descendants of a group of 12 fish that were transferred to a creek in a coffeepot 125 years ago, are considered too genetically narrow to preserve, he said.

“It’s like you have all these marbles in a barrel and they’re all different colors and you’re just taking a handful,” Stephens said. “They don’t pull in all the gene pool. If something changes, like the habitat or the temperature, they don’t have a genetic library to draw on.”

□ □ □
The Bee’s Clea Benson can be reached at (916) 326-5533 or cbenson@sacbee.com.