



ENVIRONMENT

Swimming uphill for salmon

Recently spawned fish need water most during the summer. Winter has a glut of it. The laws are no help. Three enterprising West Marin farmers ask: Can't we all just get along?

In the competition for water, one of California's scarcest resources, farmers and environmentalists often find themselves at loggerheads. Environmentalists want as much fresh water as possible to stay in California's creeks and rivers, in order to support the fast-disappearing salmon and trout. Farmers, on the other hand, need the maximum amount of available water to irrigate crops during the dry months of late spring, summer, and early fall. Unsolvable? Not for California's oldest still-operating certified organic farmer, Warren Weber of Star Route Farms, and his two upstream neighbors in Bolinas, Peter Martinelli of Fresh Run Farm and Dennis Dierks of Paradise Valley Produce. In a detailed proposal already approved by the County of Marin and now on the desks of numerous state and federal agencies, the three farmers suggest **a compromise that, if accepted, could potentially serve as a model for the entire state.**

The plan: Each of the farmers will build up to two storage ponds on his property in the watershed surrounding Pine Gulch Creek, draw out water from the creek, and store it during the rainy season. Come dry season (from July 1 to December 15), the stored water can be used to irrigate their fields. Then, in summer, Pine Gulch Creek would be at its natural flow level for the young salmon and trout, as well as for the adult fish who have journeyed from the Pacific Ocean to the Bolinas lagoon and, finally, to Pine Gulch Creek.

The California Coastal Conservancy thought the idea was worthy of a \$275,000 grant. (Lawyers, engineers, and land-use experts are expensive.) "It seems like a no-brainer," says Martinelli, who sells his produce at the Point Reyes farmers' market and to restaurants like Chez Panisse and Quince.

There's a sticky problem known as riparian rights, though. "The history of California agriculture is about cheap, easy water," says Martinelli, and, according to the law, property owners can take as much water as they can reasonably use from streams on their property—but they're not allowed to store it for more than 30 days. The committed threesome has already spent eight years going head-to-head with the antiquated law. "It may feel like we're pushing a boulder uphill, but we're making great progress," says the farmers' Oakland-based attorney, Barry Epstein.

The ETA on acquiring the rest of the permits and actually building the ponds? Anywhere from two to seven years. "I have no problem putting up with the wait," says Weber. "The three of us are coordinating our summertime draw to take the least amount possible, so it will least impact the fish. If this is what it takes to turn things around, it's worth it. We know it will make a difference."

BY BARBARA TANNENBAUM

Marin-based farmers Peter Martinelli (left) and Dennis Dierks (plus his dogs) at the source of their inspired water-supply solution, Pine Gulch Creek.