



## Russian River Biological Opinion Update – December 2020

The Sonoma County Water Agency (Sonoma Water) is continually planning and implementing the Russian River Biological Opinion requirements. Below is a brief synopsis of current work. For more detailed information, please visit [www.sonomacountywater.org](http://www.sonomacountywater.org).

### **Fish Flow Project**

The Fish Flow Habitat and Water Rights Project (Fish Flow) Draft Environmental Impact Report (Draft EIR) was released in 2016 for public comments. Submitted comments fall into a number of categories, but many comments fall into the following general issues:

- Water Quality (e.g. algae and biostimulatory conditions);
- Water Rights (e.g. illegal/unauthorized diversions along Russian River, minimum bypass flow terms in State Water Resources Control Board-issued water right permits);
- Recreation (e.g. lower Russian River recreation and tourism, quantity and quality of river flow for recreation);
- Independent Science Review Panel (ISRP) Report (e.g. consideration of results/recommendations of ISRP report in Draft EIR);
- Proposed Project description and alternatives (e.g. consideration of “adaptive management” in implementation of proposed project).

Sonoma Water staff are currently working on revisions in anticipation of recirculating the Draft EIR in spring 2021.

### **Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Project**

Hanford ARC, the contractor hired by Sonoma Water to construct the remaining Phase III sites, has completed construction of the project elements that were required to be completed in 2020 per Sonoma Water’s agreements with the landowners. Despite a one-week delay due to the mandatory evacuations for the Walbridge fire, Hanford completed all anticipated work for the season and have prepared the site for the winter. Although the instream work window ended on October 15, the Environmental staff at Sonoma Water were able to obtaining extensions from the RWQCB and CADFW because of the dry conditions to allow Hanford to keep working in the creek area through November 6<sup>th</sup>, which allowed Hanford to complete the required work for this season. Construction of the two remaining Phase III project elements is planned for the 2021 in-stream work window from June 15 to October 15.

Hanford has also completed maintenance activities on four previously constructed projects under a separate contract. This work involved primarily removing sediment deposited during the sustained flood flows that occurred in February and March of 2019 in order to restore flows to three different habitat features at sites that were constructed as part of the Dry Creek Demonstration, Phase 2, and Phase 3 habitat projects. The maintenance work also repaired some minor erosion that was occurring around one of the engineered log structures at a fourth site that was located in the Demonstration Project area. Habitat monitoring is ongoing to document the habitat function at these sites.

As the construction of the final elements of Phases I through III nears completion, Sonoma Water and the Army Corps of Engineers continue to make progress on Phases IV - VI of the habitat enhancement project. Sonoma Water right-of-way staff remain hard at work negotiating easements with property owners, while Sonoma Water and the Corps review the 99% design documents and prepare the bid package that will be advertised by the Corps for the Phase IV sites, which are grouped in two reaches of Dry Creek: one approximately one mile downstream and another two miles upstream of Yoakim Bridge. The bid package will likely include a base project of sites for construction in 2021 with the option to construct the remaining sites in 2021 or in 2022. Sonoma Water and Corps staff have developed a formal Project Partnership Agreement (PPA) that describes the financial terms, roles, and responsibilities of the Corps-led construction effort. The PPA was recently signed by the Chair of the Board for Sonoma Water and is anticipated to be signed by the District Commander from the Corps of Engineers’ San Francisco District in early December 2020.

## **Fish Monitoring**

One of the main objectives of habitat enhancements in mainstem Dry Creek is to create suitable habitat for juvenile coho salmon. Sonoma Water has a comprehensive monitoring plan to assess whether habitat conditions are being met. However, validating whether juveniles are using those habitats is difficult especially since coho in the Russian River watershed are so scarce these days. Fortunately, we have a hatchery program that can supply young coho for planting in enhancement sites. To encourage planted fish to stay in enhancement sites immediately following release, we temporarily (6 to 9 days) placed fish in cages within enhancement sites before releasing from the cages. Follow-up monitoring suggests that most fish (up to 64%) remained in the enhanced sites upon release from cages. Based on data from past years, of the fish released directly into enhancement sites without being first held in cages only ~10% remained in the enhanced sites. We plan to refine the cage release strategy in the future and apply it more broadly in Dry Creek habitat enhancement sites.



*Sonoma Water's Eric McDermott (at left) inspects the temporary holding cage that young coho will be placed into for 6-9 days.*



*The young coho are transferred from carrying containers into the cage.*



*This photo shows the young fish (photographed through a net) immediately following the transfer into the cage. (Images by Jak Wonderly, for Sonoma Water)*

### **Russian River Estuary Management Project**

The 2020 management season began on May 15 and ended on October 15. The river mouth closed on September 28, self-breached on October 26. The river mouth closed again on December 1, 2020. The 2020 Adaptive Management Plan was finalized in May. Baseline, weekly pinniped monitoring is ongoing and the remaining biological monitoring has concluded for the season.



*Photo of Russian River mouth closure taken December 1, 2020.*

### **Interim Flow Changes**

Water supply conditions are currently *Dry*. Normally, under *Dry* conditions, Sonoma Water would not be filing Temporary Urgency Change Petitions (Petitions) with the State Water Resources Control Board to modify the minimum instream flow requirements for the Russian River as established by Decision 1610 for Permits 12947 A, 12949, 12950 and 16596. In the spring, however, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission issued a variance for the operation of

PG&E's Potter Valley Project. The change in operation was expected to result in limited transfers of water through the hydroelectric project this summer and adversely impact water storage levels in Lake Mendocino. Sonoma Water staff modelled the expected changes and, based on that work, prepared a supporting technical memo and Petitions. The Petitions were filed on June 8, 2020. The Temporary Urgency Change Order (Order) was issued by the State Water Board on July 28, 2020. We will operate under the terms of the Order through December 27 when it expires. A press release on the Petitions can be found here: <https://www.sonomawater.org/news/post/9340/>. The Order can be found here: <https://www.sonomawater.org/tucp>