



## Russian River Biological Opinion Update – March 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 about these activities, 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 working on revisions in anticipation of recirculating the Draft EIR. Staff are also working on outreach materials to improve communication and understanding of key topics related to the Fish Flow Project.

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

Sonoma Water is working to start construction in the summer of 2020 on the last remaining Phase 3 project in Reach 5 approximately five miles upstream from the confluence with the Russian River. Sonoma Water Staff have reviewed the final designs, and are preparing the bid package (plans and specifications) that will be advertised to contractors, while also obtaining permits and finalizing the last agreements with property owners. Advertisement of the project to potential bidders is scheduled for March 5. Sonoma Water is also planning maintenance work for next year to restore full function to sites that accumulated sediment during extended high flows.

Sonoma Water and the Army Corps are moving ahead with Phases IV - VI of the habitat enhancement project, which make up the last three of the six miles required by the Russian River Biological Opinion. On February 10, the Army Corps published their fiscal year 2020 work plan that included a new-start designation and \$28.3 million dollars - the full amount of federal funding needed to complete the Corps' Dry Creek Ecosystem Restoration Project. Sonoma Water is the non-federal sponsor for the project and will contribute a 35% cost share. The Army Corps plans to Construct Phase IV in 2021, Phase V in 2022, and Phase VI in 2023. The design consultants have addressed comments received from the 60% design reviews and are due to submit the 90% design packages at the end of February.

Sonoma Water continues to meet with property owners participating in Phases IV, V, and VI to present the 60% designs, obtain comments, answer questions, address concerns, and explain the process.

### **Fish Monitoring**

During Sonoma Water's spawner surveys for salmon and steelhead, our field crews have the opportunity to observe many natural phenomenon both on land and in water. One of the more unusual fish species in the Russian River is the Pacific lamprey. Like salmon and steelhead, this fish is anadromous meaning it begins life in freshwater then migrates to the ocean before returning to freshwater to spawn. They build nests (also called redds) using their sucker-like mouth to move stream gravel around (see photo below). In the ocean, Pacific lamprey are parasitic feeding on marine and other

anadromous fish species. Pacific lamprey are among the earth's oldest residents; fossil records indicate they may be up to 450 million years, which is twice as old as dinosaurs! Relatively little is known about Pacific lamprey biology as compared to salmonids but in many places their numbers have also dwindled. Sonoma Water's ongoing fish monitoring programs allows us to collect data on Pacific lamprey numbers with our video monitoring system at the Mirabel dam as fish make their upstream spawning migration. Like salmon, lamprey are an indicator of stream health as well as an important part of a well-functioning ecosystem.



***Pacific lamprey building a nest in Pena Creek, a tributary to Dry Creek.***

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

The 2020 management season begins on May 15 and end on October 15. Staff and consultants are working on the draft 2020 Adaptive Management Plan due by April 1. Biological and water quality monitoring will resume in May, including fisheries and water quality monitoring. Weekly baseline pinniped monitoring is ongoing.

The river mouth closed on Sunday, January 5, 2020, and water surface elevations in the lagoon increased quickly. The barrier beach was artificially breached on Tuesday, January 7, 2020, by which time water levels had risen to 10.03 ft. The estuary is currently open.

#### **Interim Flow Changes**

Water supply conditions are currently *Normal*. Sonoma Water filed 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 on April 23, 2019. The June 20, 2019 Order Approving Petitions for Temporary Urgency Changes to Permit Terms and Conditions (Order) expired on October 15, 2019. Several reports required by the Order will be prepared and filed with the state in 2020. The Petitions were filed as required by the Russian River Biological Opinion issued by the National Marine Fisheries Service in September 2008. Sonoma Water is considering filing Petitions in the near future to reduce minimum instream flow requirements due to the continued dry weather and the potential need to preserve storage in Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma. An analysis is currently be conducted to determine storage level-triggers that may be proposed in Petitions filed for this purpose.

## **Join us for the 2020 PPFC Meeting**

The Public Policy Facilitating Committee (PPFC) is holding its annual meeting to discuss and take public comment on the Russian River Biological Opinion.

When: **Thursday, March 12, 2020**  
**2-3 p.m. Dry Creek Tour, Meet at Lake Sonoma Visitors Center**  
**4– 6 p.m. PPFC and Dry Creek Community Meeting**

Where: **Healdsburg Community Center, 1557 Healdsburg Avenue, Healdsburg**

This year we will be combining the PPFC meeting with the annual Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Project's Community Meeting. A tour of a Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Project site along Dry Creek will precede the meeting starting at 2 p.m. We will meet at the Lake Sonoma Visitors Center at 2 p.m. for a very short drive to the site. If you plan to attend the tour, please wear sturdy shoes. Following the tour there will be an open house at the Healdsburg Community Center from 3:30-4 p.m. with posters and Sonoma Water staff on hand to answer questions. The PPFC meeting will include presentations on the Dry Creek Project, the Estuary Management Project and the Fish Flows and Water Rights Project Public Outreach.