



## Russian River Biological Opinion Update – May 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 has advertised the project to contractors and selected the lowest of the 4 bidders. The contract is scheduled to go to the Board of Supervisors on June 2 for approval. The Right-of-Way agreements for all property owners are now finalized and the remaining permits are being obtained. Sonoma Water is also planning maintenance work for summer 2020 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 when combined with the 35% cost share from Sonoma Water. 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 90% design reviews and are due to submit the 99% design packages at the end of July 2020.

Sonoma Water continues to meet with property owners participating in Phases IV, V, and VI to present the 90% designs, obtain comments, answer questions, address concerns, and explain the process, while working out the right-way agreements needed to implement the project.

### **Fish Monitoring**

If you are a fish biologist, spring is the season for monitoring migration of young salmon and steelhead from their natal tributaries to the ocean. These young migrants, called smolts, must navigate the perils of a long journey to the ocean then back again. Along with California Sea Grant, Sonoma Water operates devices known as fish traps to capture smolts at eight locations in the lower Russian River watershed from Dry Creek to Willow Creek. Each day these downstream

migrant traps are checked by field crews. Fish are gently removed from the trap so biologists can count them and collect biological information from individuals. The data we collect are important in helping us understand whether habitat and population enhancement measures are working to halt widespread declines in salmon and steelhead and hopefully bolster their numbers.



*Pictured at left is a downstream migrant trap on Mill Creek. At right is a downstream migrant trap on 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, which will be finalized by May 15. Staff are anticipating resuming biological and water quality monitoring on a modified basis later in May, including fisheries and water quality monitoring. Weekly baseline pinniped monitoring was briefly suspended due to COVID-19, but resumed and is ongoing.

The river mouth closed on April 29, 2020. At the time of drafting this report, the river mouth was closed and water surface elevation in the lagoon was 8 ft.



*Harbor seals land their pups basking on the beach at Jenner on May 6 with the mouth of the river closed.*

### **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. Recently, however, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission issued a variance for the operation of PG&E's Potter Valley Project. The change in operation is 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 have modelled the expected changes and, based on that work, are preparing a technical memo and Petitions. We expect to file the Petitions before June 1<sup>st</sup> and hope to have a Temporary Urgency Change Order in place by July 1st.

Last year's 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 were filed with the state around April 1, 2020.