



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – January 4, 2021

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.

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 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. 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 projects constructed previously during the Demonstration, 2nd, and 3rd phases of the project. This work involved removing sediment deposits, managing vegetation, and repairing some minor erosion.

Sonoma Water environmental staff have been busy conducting physical and biological surveys on newly constructed and maintained sites to verify they were built according to the plans and to quantify the habitat created. This involves surveying the topography at the site, the bathymetry in the creek channel and habitat features, the velocity and depth of the water, and the location and extent of specific habitat structures such as log jams, pools, and riffles. Dry Creek is a primary release site for hatchery coho and steelhead and environmental staff are also conducting snorkeling surveys to evaluate usage of the habitat features as described below. Juveniles have been rearing in the habitat features this past summer and spawning adults were recently observed in the Reach 14 Gallo side channel constructed in 2019.

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.

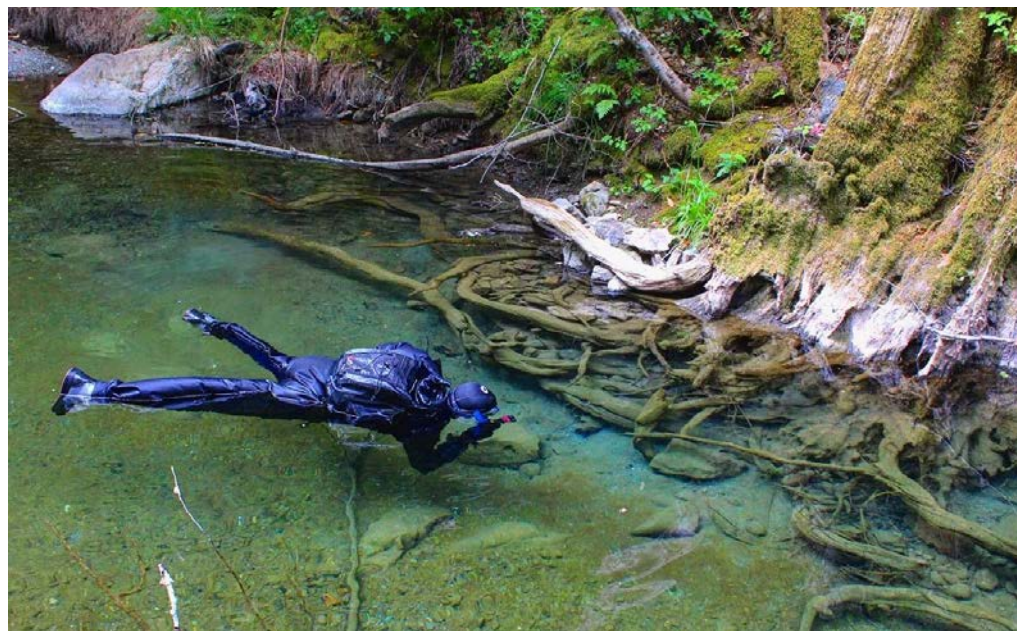


Lieutenant Colonel John D. Cunningham, the District Commander from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' San Francisco District, signs the Project Partnership Agreement between the Corps and Sonoma Water.

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 signed by Lieutenant Colonel John D. Cunningham, the District Commander from the Corps of Engineers' San Francisco District, on December 22, 2020.

Fish Monitoring

Despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and yet another year marked by wildfires in the Russian River Watershed, Sonoma Water was able to accomplish most of our fish monitoring objectives in 2020. We managed to conduct four of our usual five surveys with beach seining in the estuary as the only survey that could not be safely carried out given state and county health guidelines. In total, we sampled fish populations in 66 tributaries where we captured or observed 82,504 individual fish of which 69,376 were salmon or steelhead and we assisted the Corps in tagging 30,000 young hatchery coho salmon destined for release into tributaries to the Russian River. We witnessed adult Chinook and coho salmon spawning in newly created habitats along Dry Creek and we strengthened relationships with the Corps which allowed new monitoring directions and new tools to better understand how fish are making use of those habitat enhancements.



Sonoma Water staff member conducting a snorkel survey on Austin Creek.



Male and female coho salmon spawning in Gallo side channel, Dry Creek, December, 2020.

Russian River Estuary Management Project

As of December 23, 2020, the mouth of the Russian River closed seven times in 2020; twice during the lagoon management season (May 15 – October 15). Sonoma Water artificially breached the barrier beach three times, all outside the lagoon management season. The 2020 Adaptive Management Plan was finalized in May. Sonoma Water will submit a draft of the 2021 Adaptive Management Plan to resource agencies by April 1, 2020. Baseline, weekly pinniped monitoring is ongoing and the remaining biological monitoring has concluded for the season.



The Russian River mouth is open during the December 14, 2020 king tide.

Interim Flow Changes

The Temporary Urgency Change Order (Order) that was issued by the State Water Board on July 28, 2020 expired on December 27, 2020. Water supply conditions are expected to change to *Normal* on January 1, 2021 as established by Decision 1610 for Permits 12947 A, 12949, 12950 and 16596. This change means that the minimum flow requirements in the Russian River will increase to levels that cannot be sustained if additional, substantial precipitation does not occur in the next few months. Additionally, PG&E is preparing a variance request for Potter Valley Project operations due to low water storage levels at Lake Pillsbury. If a variance request is approved by FERC, a change in operations would result in

limited transfers of water through the hydroelectric project and would adversely impact water storage levels in Lake Mendocino. Sonoma Water staff is modeling the expected changes and, based on that work, finalizing a Temporary Urgency Change Petition and supporting technical memorandum. The Petition is expected to be filed the week of January 4, 2021.