



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – February 1, 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, second, and third 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 release site for hatchery coho and steelhead, and environmental staff are also conducting snorkeling surveys to evaluate use of habitat features. On several occasions in multiple habitat enhancement sites, we have observed spawning by adult coho, Chinook, and steelhead. We have also documented juvenile fish making use of all side channels and backwaters constructed to date.

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. For the Phase IV sites on track to begin construction in 2021, Sonoma Water right-of-way staff are working to finalize and close easement agreements with property owners, while Sonoma Water and the Corps review the 99% design documents. The Phase IV sites 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 is also in the process of procuring the logs and large wood materials needed to construct the habitat structures in the Phase IV project, the cost of which will count

towards Sonoma Water's 35% in-kind match obligation to the Corps. A request for proposals was released in November 2020 and Sonoma Water is in the process of reviewing the proposals received and preparing a Board item to execute contracts with suppliers.

Sonoma Water also continues advance the right-of-way agreements with Phase V property owners, which involves appraising the value of the easements, and meeting with property owner and addressing their questions and concerns. Construction of Phase V is scheduled to begin in 2022.

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.



This photo shows the first Chinook on the Mirabel video of the 2020 season

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River closed eight times in 2020; twice during the lagoon management season (May 15 – October 15). Sonoma Water artificially breached the barrier beach four times, all outside the lagoon management season. So far in 2021, the river mouth has closed four times. 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 and will resume in the spring.



This photo shows the mouth of the Russian River closed on January 12, 2021.

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 changed 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 increased to levels that staff estimated 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 modeled the expected changes and, based on that work, filed a Temporary Urgency Change Petition (Petition) and supporting technical memorandum on January 7, 2021. The Petition requested that watershed conditions in the Russian River basin, specifically storage levels at Lake Mendocino, be used to determine water supply conditions and set minimum stream flow requirements in the Russian River instead of cumulative storage at Lake Pillsbury. The Petition was noticed on January 19, 2021 and an Order from the State Water Board is pending.

A term of the July 28, 2020 Order required Sonoma Water to monitor the migration of salmon and steelhead and to meet at least bi-weekly to discuss river flow and fishery conditions with NMFS and CDFW. Sonoma Water staff met with the fishery agencies eight times from November 6 to December 29, 2020. To preserve reservoir storage, fishery agency staff agreed to limit flow increases in the lower river until a breach of the sandbar and precipitation were imminent. Sonoma Water increased flow during the first of week of November and maintained flow levels that were adequate for migration and spawning throughout the duration of the Order. Due in part to closure of the river mouth and dry hydrologic conditions, counts of Chinook salmon (the earliest arriving species) were below average throughout the fall and have remained low through early winter.

Species	Number of Fish
Chinook Salmon	602
Coho Salmon	248
Steelhead	184
Grand Total	1,034

