# Russian River Biological Opinion Update – November 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 2022.

## Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Project

### Construction

Hanford ARC, the contractor for Sonoma Water, completed the construction of the two remaining Phase III Reach 5A project elements in late September and has fully demobilized.

*Photograph looking east at the downstream end of the Reach 5A side-channel habitat feature (farground) taken at high flow during the October 24th rainfall event. The Dry Creek mainstem is in the foreground flowing left to right.*

### Habitat Monitoring and Maintenance

Sonoma Water environmental staff continue to conduct physical and biological surveys on previously constructed and maintained sites to quantify the habitat areas and identify changes or maintenance needs. This involves collecting topographic data and imagery with drones, surveying the topography and the underwater bathymetry, measuring the velocity and depth of the water, and recording the

location and extent of specific habitat structures such as log jams, pools, and riffles. A post-construction drone flight was conducted on October 6th and a 2nd flight is planned for October 26 to evaluate changes following the approximately 3000 cfs flows during October 24 rainfall event.

*Photograph of the downstream end of the newly constructed Site 5A side channel taken October 25th following the high flow event*

**Phases IV – VI**

Inter-Fluve, Inc. has completed the bid documents for Phase IV, which is planned for construction in summer 2022. The Corps has completed their review of the right-of-way agreement modifications that were requested by some of the participating property owners and submitted the results to Sonoma Water. Sonoma Water will now reach out to the property owners to discuss the Corps' feedback and terms, and revise agreements if necessary. Logs and large wood materials that SW has purchased to construct the habitat structures in the Phase IV project are still being delivered to the Corps yard at Warm Springs Dam and stored until construction in 2022.

ESA and Cardno have completed the 99% design submittals for Phases V and VI, respectively. Construction of Phase V is scheduled to begin in summer 2023 and Phase VI in 2024. Phase V right-of-way appraisals are complete, and Sonoma Water has presented right-of-way offers to the property owners for review. The Sonoma Water right-of-way staff and project manager are also working with Cardno and the Phase VI property owners to finalize the access routes and staging areas for these projects and prepare right-of-way compensation offers.

ESA, the design consultant for Phases III and V, submitted the 30% design package for an additional site immediately upstream of the Phase III site currently under construction in Reach 5. Additionally, Adobe Associates, Inc. also submitted a planning-level cost estimate for a tributary crossing that may be required for construction access. Sonoma Water and ESA held the internal design review meeting on September 9 and met with the property owners on October 14th to discuss the project, show them the plans, and obtain feedback. The property owner generally approved of the proposed habitat feature designs and will continue to work with Sonoma Water to update designs, finalize access routes and design improvements that may be needed to make them suitable for construction, and incorporate measures to resolve existing site constraints. Sonoma Water Environmental staff are setting up an on-site meeting with the regulatory agencies in December to obtain their input and preliminary approval for the project.

## Fish Monitoring

Due to the large storm event that occurred from October 23 to 24, we suspended operation of Sonoma Water's underwater video system at the Mirabel fish ladder that is used to obtain annual counts of upstream migrating adult salmon and steelhead. It remains uncertain whether we be able to restore video operation in 2021. If we are unable to do so, the October 23 date will mark the earliest date that the video system has been terminated since we began video monitoring in 2000.

As of 10/23/2021 date only 38 Chinook and a few steelhead were observed passing through the Mirabel Fish Ladder during historically low flow conditions. With the recent storm and breaching of the estuary, the migration of salmon and steelhead is no doubt accelerating but without Mirabel Dam inflated we will not be able to compare this season's count to previous years.

*Photograph of the newly installed Mirabel Rubber Dam taken Saturday, Oct. 23 as it was being deflated and the Russian River was rising. It was the first time that water flowed over the dam since it was installed earlier this summer.*

## Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River closed on September 28, 2021. Sonoma Water staff were anticipating a long, closure without rain. Conditions changed quickly with the atmospheric river on October 24th and the estuary quickly surpassed the 9-foot initial flood stage in the lagoon. Rising river inflows and overwashing ocean waves resulted in the peak water surface elevation in the closed lagoon reaching approximately 11.2 feet before the barrier beach self-breached. Water surface elevations in the open estuary remained elevated (peaking at approx. 8 feet) on October 25th due to very high ocean waves and peaking river flows.

The lagoon management season concluded on October 15th and so did the associated biological monitoring. Baseline, weekly pinniped monitoring continues. Water quality monitoring may resume under the current Temporary Urgency Change Order once river flows decline after the storm. Water quality monitoring data can be viewed as it becomes available in the weekly water quality status report: https://www.sonomawater.org/tucp

*The Russian River mouth on October 25, 2021.*

## Interim Flow Changes

*Lake Mendocino, Oct. 13, 2021. Photo courtesy of state Department of Water Resources*

On May 11, 2021, Sonoma Water filed Temporary Urgency Change Petitions (Petitions) to request a reduction in minimum instream flow requirements for the Lower Russian River and the Upper Russian River. This was in response to very low storage levels at both Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma. An Order approving the Petitions was approved on June 14, 2021. The Order includes a number of monitoring and reporting requirements. In addition, it requires Sonoma Water to reduce its Russian River diversions by 20 percent for the term of the Order compared to the same period in 2020 in an additional effort to preserve storage at Lake Sonoma. The order was amended on October 22, 2021 to link the requirement to reduce Russian River diversions by 20 percent to the water rights curtailments in the upper Russian River per the State's Emergency Drought Declaration. Curtailments are currently temporarily suspended due to high natural flows. The Order expires in December of 2021.