



## Russian River Biological Opinion Update – March 7, 2022

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](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 currently working on revisions in anticipation of recirculating the Draft EIR in 2022.

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

#### **Construction**

No construction activity this period.

#### **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.

Sonoma Water field crews have performed maintenance work using manual labor to reopen inlets and connections to previously constructed habitat features that were partially blocked by debris.



*Aerial drone flights (like this one from 2019) are conducted to evaluate changes to habitat enhancement sites following high-flow rainfall events.*

## **Phases IV – VI**

Sonoma Water and the Corps of Engineers are implementing Phases IV – VI of the Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Project under a cost-share partnership where the Corps of Engineers covers 65% of the cost and implements the actual construction. Inter-Fluve, Inc. has completed the final plans and specifications for Phase IV, and the Corps of Engineers is preparing the bid documents to advertise the project in April for construction in 2022 and 2023. As part of the process for preparing the bid package, the Corps is conducting their required Buildability, Constructability, Operability, Environmental and Sustainability (BCOES) Review. Sonoma Water has been supporting this effort and led the BCOES review team from the Corps of Engineers on a tour of the Phase IV project sites on February 14. Sonoma Water Right-of-Way staff are in the final stages of executing the right-of-way agreements with the participating property owners and expect to close them by mid-March.

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. Sonoma Water has presented right-of-way offers to the property owners in Phase V for review. Property Owners for the Phase V sites are reviewing the appraisals and compensation estimates for the right-of-way easements. 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.

The additional Phase V site in Reach 5B, immediately upstream of the Phase III site constructed in 2021 in Reach 5, is in the 60% design Phase, with the next design submittal due in April. ESA is using hydraulic models to refine the project design and addressing feedback from the 30% design review meeting with Sonoma Water and the on-site meeting with the property owner. The updates primarily involve refining the designs of bank repair and log features and evaluating options for resolving access constraints. Sonoma Water staff and the design consultants met with the Resource Agency staff in January to obtain input and guidance on the design of the project elements. Sonoma Water Environmental Resource staff are now setting up an on-site meeting with the regulatory agency staff to obtain additional input on the project design and preliminary approval of certain project elements.

## **Fish Monitoring**

Although adult steelhead are still returning to the Russian River and spawning, the 2021-22 spawner season for coho salmon has come to a close. This season marks the highest number of coho salmon spawning in the Russian River Watershed in many years. There are several contributing factors. One is the overall success of the carefully managed coho broodstock program operated out of Don Clausen Warm Springs Hatchery. Without the young coho the facility produces, coho in the Russian may well have disappeared by now. Habitat enhancements in Dry Creek and elsewhere in the basin have undoubtedly also helped but other factors outside of our control will remain challenges to full population recovery.



*Male coho salmon in spawning colors at the Don Clausen Warm Springs Hatchery.*

## **Russian River Estuary Management Project**

The mouth of the Russian River closed on February 27, 2022. Sonoma Water staff are monitoring conditions to determine if an artificial breach will need to be scheduled to minimize flood risk. There was also a closure on February 18 followed by a self-breach on February 19, 2022. The lagoon management season begins on May 15<sup>th</sup> and Sonoma Water staff anticipate beginning fisheries and water quality monitoring in May, depending on streamflows. Baseline, weekly pinniped monitoring continues.

## **Interim Flow Changes**

On November 16, 2021, Sonoma Water filed Temporary Urgency Change Petitions to request the water supply condition, which sets the minimum instream flow requirements, be determined based on storage thresholds at Lake Mendocino rather than cumulative inflow into Lake Pillsbury. This was in response to equipment failures at Pacific Gas & Electric Company's Potter Valley Project, which has resulted in significantly reduced transfers of Eel River water into the Russian River watershed. An Order approving the Petitions was issued by the State Water Resources Control Board on December 10, 2021. The order expires on June 7, 2022. Based on Lake Mendocino storage thresholds, the water supply condition for the Russian River changed from *Dry* to *Critical* on March 1. Consequently, the minimum instream flow requirement decreased from 75 cfs to 25 cfs on the Upper Russian River and from 85 cfs to 35 cfs on the Lower Russian River.



*Lake Mendocino on Oct. 13, 2021.*

*Photo courtesy of Department of Water Resources*