Russian River Biological Opinion Update – June 6, 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.

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 2023.

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 recently installed container plantings at existing habitat sites in the Reach 14 area of Dry Creek.

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. Sonoma Water right-of-way staff and counsel closed escrow and certified real estate for the 9 properties in reaches 10 and 13 that are participating in the project. The Corps of Engineers had advertised the Phase IV project for construction on April 8 and Sonoma Water and Corps staff conducted a site visit for 12 potential bidders on April 20. The Corps of Engineers opened construction bids on May 19. The Corps is currently reviewing the five bids received and plans for construction to begin mid-summer.

ESA is working on revisions to the 99% Phase V design report, plans, and specifications and the Corps intends to advertise in fall 2022 for 2023 construction. Property Owners for the Phase V sites are reviewing their agreements 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. Construction of Phase VI is planned to begin in 2024.

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. Sonoma Water and ESA staff held an on-site meeting on May 5 with the regulatory agency staff to obtain preliminary approval of the proposed designs and reinforce overall support for the project. Following the Site 5B visit, Sonoma Water also showed the regulatory staff (representatives from National Marine Fisheries Service, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board) a selection of the existing completed habitat sites throughout Dry Creek.

Dry Creek Reach 5A (Phase 3, Part 3). This site was constructed in 2021 and was one of the stops that regulatory agency representatives were shown on May 5. Photo taken May 5, 2022.

Fish Monitoring

Over the years, Sonoma Water has relied on electronic tags to address questions raised by the Russian River Biological Opinion. Electronic tags have also been an instrumental tool in evaluations of the Russian River Coho Salmon broodstock program. The types of tags used include passive integrated transponder (PIT) tags and acoustic tags. Though the manner in which these two types of tags work differ, the basic idea is the same: tags are surgically implanted into the body cavity of individual fish before they are released into the wild then PIT antennas and acoustic receivers placed at fixed locations record the time and date as tagged fish pass their location. Though the tag implantation procedure is invasive, studies conducted by Sonoma Water as well as several published studies have shown that the techniques we use have virtually no impact fish survival or growth. The information yielded from electronic tags and tag detections informs smolt and adult salmon and steelhead abundance, migration mortality, marine survival and habitat use.

PIT tagging procedure and PIT antenna (left photo) and acoustic tagging procedure and acoustic receiver (right photo).

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River has closed eight times so far in 2022, most recently on May 6. The lagoon management season began on May 15th and Sonoma Water staff kicked off fisheries and water quality monitoring this month. Baseline, weekly pinniped monitoring continues. Sonoma Water staff completed the 2022 Adaptive Beach Management Plan and it is available here:
https://www.sonomawater.org/media/PDF/Environment/BiologicalOpinion/Estuary/RRE_2022_Beach_mmgt_plan_2022-05-23.pdf

Interim Flow Changes

On November 16, 2021, Sonoma Water filed Temporary Urgency Change Petitions (Petitions) with the Division of Water Rights (Division) 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 Division on December 10, 2021. The order expires on June 8, 2022. Based on Lake Mendocino storage thresholds, the water supply condition for the Russian River remains *Critical*. Consequently, the minimum instream flow requirement continues to be 25 cfs on the Upper Russian River and 35 cfs on the Lower Russian River. On May 25, 2022 Sonoma Water again filed Petitions with the Division requesting that the Russian River remain in a *Critical* water supply classification for another 180 days. Without the State Board approving the requested

changes, the Russian River water supply condition would be classified as *Normal Dry-Spring II*, which would increase the minimum instream flow requirement on the Upper Russian from 25 cfs to 75 cfs and on the Lower Russian River from 35 cfs to 125 cfs. Reservoir releases to meet these higher minimum instream flow requirements would severely deplete storage in both Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma; and result in releases from Lake Sonoma that violate the Incidental Take Statement in the 2008 Russian River Biological Opinion. The Petitions include commitments for reporting and a 20 percent reduction in diversions (compared to 2020) from the Russian River from July 1 through October 31, 2022.