



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – November 1, 2022

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.SonomaWater.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

The Corps is in the process of constructing Phase IV of the Dry Creek Project, which consists of sites in Reaches 10 and 13 of Dry Creek. They awarded the construction contract to the lowest bidder, McCullough Construction, Inc., on May 31, 2022.—Construction of the Reach 13 sites began on August 1, 2022. The Reach contains two sites, 13A and 13B. The 13B site portion of the construction contract is complete and the 13A site is approximately 60% complete and expected to be complete by the October 15th in-stream work deadline. The Reach 10 sites will be constructed in 2023, however, the Contractor is planning to do some pre-clearing and access improvement work in October. The Corps is held a groundbreaking ceremony at the Reach 13 site on August 16, 2022 which was attended by staff from the Corps, Sonoma Water, and the design consultants, as well as staff from the National Marine Fisheries Service, California Fish and Wildlife, Congressman Huffman’s office, Dry Creek Rancheria Band of Pomo Indians, and landowner representatives.



Dry Creek Reach 13 Groundbreaking Ceremony. August 16, 2022.



Dry Creek Reach 13 under construction. August 16, 2022.

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 additional willow cuttings in the Reach 8 area to provide additional shade and cover at specific locations. Sonoma water staff is in the process of obtaining additional container plantings to prepare for planting in the fall at a number of the existing habitat sites in 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. Phase IV is currently under construction as described above.

ESA addressed the District Quality Control (DQC) review comments and submitted the 100% Phase V design report, plans and specifications. The Corps intends to advertise the project in late 2022 or early 2023 for 2023 construction. Property Owners for the properties where the Phase V sites are located are reviewing their compensation offers and agreements for the right-of-way easements necessary to construct and maintain the projects.

The Sonoma Water right-of-way staff and project manager continue to work with 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. Sonoma Water GIS and right-of-way staff have provided the maps and necessary information to the appraiser and they are appraising the value of the right-of-way compensation amounts.

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 is coordinating with the permitting agencies, property owners and design consultants and the design consultants are surveying existing vegetation and preparing a 30% design for the selected drainage crossing needed for site access. Sonoma Water right-of-way staff are preparing the right-of-way compensation offer and agreement to present to the property owner.

Public Outreach

Sonoma Water held an update meeting for the Dry Creek Valley Association Board members on August 17th.

Fish Monitoring

An underwater video camera was installed in Sonoma Water's Mirabel dam fish ladder on September 1, 2022. To date, 95 adult Chinook and 6 coho salmon have been observed. We are seeing a slow start to the Chinook spawning migration this year. However, the Chinook migration is triggered by rainfall and increasing river flows. During times of drought, the migration is often delayed until storms arrive. Coho typically return to the Russian River slightly later than Chinook salmon. Unlike Chinook, coho are tributary spawners and are even more reliant on rainfall to access their habitat. Currently many of the lowest sections of the tributaries to the Russian river remain dry and much of the coho spawning habitat lies beyond these dry sections of stream in the tributaries.

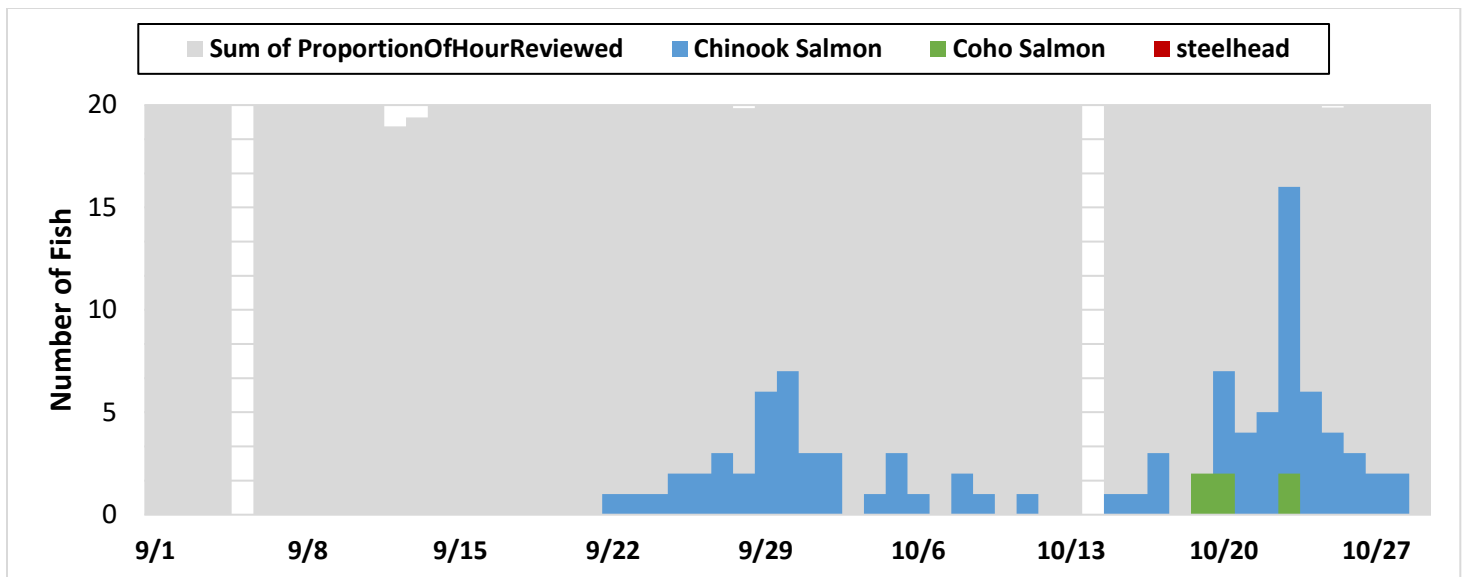


Figure 1. Number of adult salmonids and proportion of each day reviewed for video monitoring data collected at the Mirabel dam, 2022.

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 continued fisheries, pinniped, and water quality monitoring in June, along with the monthly beach topographic survey. The lagoon management period ends on October 15.

Interim Flow Changes

On May 25, 2022 Sonoma Water filed Temporary Urgency Change Petitions with the Division of Water Rights (Division) requesting that the Russian River water supply condition be classified as *Critical*. Without the requested changes, the Russian River water supply condition would be classified as *Normal Dry-Spring II*, which would require the minimum instream flow requirement on the Upper Russian be 75 cfs and on the Lower Russian River be 125 cfs for the remainder of the year. Based on reservoir storage forecasts prepared by Sonoma Water engineering staff, reservoir releases to meet these minimum instream flow requirements would severely deplete storage in both Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma; and result in releases from Lake Sonoma that would violate the Incidental Take Statement in the 2008 Russian River Biological Opinion. The Petitions include commitments for monitoring and reporting, and a 20 percent reduction in diversions (compared to 2020) from the Russian River from July 1 through October 31, 2022 or until flows at the US Geological Survey gage at Hacienda Bridge are at or above 125 cfs. On June 17, 2022, the Division issued an order approving the requested changes. The order expires on December 13, 2022.

On October 28, 2022, Sonoma Water filed Temporary Urgency Change Petitions with the Division requesting that the water supply condition, which determines the minimum instream flow requirements, be changed from cumulative inflow into Lake Pillsbury (in the Eel River watershed) to storage thresholds at Lake Mendocino starting December 14, 2022. This is in response to the ongoing reduced transfer of Eel River water into the Russian River watershed due to the transformer bank failure at the Potter Valley Project powerhouse.

Biological Assessment for New Biological Opinion

In anticipation of the expiration of the 2008 Biological Opinion (BO) in September 2023, Sonoma Water is working with National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to reinitiate consultation and develop a Biological Assessment (BA) for continuation of the USACE and Sonoma Water operations in the Russian River watershed. A summary of work completed to date was provided in the August 2022 update.

ESA is preparing the administrative draft Biological Assessment and a draft Biological Assessment is anticipated in late fall 2022.