



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – January 9, 2023

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.

Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Project

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.

Phases IV is being constructed in 2022 and 2023, Phase V is beginning construction in 2023, and Phase VI is tentatively planned for construction in 2024. 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, obtain appraisals for the value of the right-of-way compensation amounts, 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. Sonoma Water right-of-way staff presented the right-of-way compensation offer and agreement to the property owner in the fall of 2022 and the property owner responded with a counteroffer. Sonoma Water addressed the questions, concerns and proposed requirements in the counteroffer to the extent possible and is waiting for a response from the property owner.

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. McCullough Construction completed both Reach 13 sites in 2022 by the October 15th in-stream work deadline, with the exception of the inlet to the 13B site, which will be constructed in 2023 by Sonoma Water. The nine Reach 10 sites will be constructed in 2023 and McCullough has cleared some vegetation and made access improvements in advance of the start of the 2023 in-stream work window on June 15th.

Sonoma Water is preparing to advertise the 13B inlet construction in mid-to-late January of 2023 once the remaining 2 environmental permits are obtained. Construction of this small project component is expected to start in late June or early July.

The Corps also plans to advertise Phase V of the Project in late January of 2023 in order for construction to begin in May for areas that are more than 100 feet from the Dry Creek mainstem and then June 15th for the in-stream elements of the project. The Corps completed their Biddability, Constructability, Operability, Environmental and Sustainability (BCOES) review on the 100% level bid documents and ESA, the design consultant, is addressing the final comments received. Right-of-way agreements for all Phase V owners will be submitted to the Corps for certification by mid-January.

Habitat Monitoring and Maintenance

Although presently on hold due to high flows in the creek and weather conditions, Sonoma Water environmental staff continue to evaluate and monitor 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, monitoring fish use using pit tags and fish surveys, and recording the location and extent of specific habitat structures such as log jams, pools, and riffles. The monitoring staff is processing data to quantify habitat areas and scores, create graphics, assign scores to habitat sites, determine fish use, and produce other related results.

Public Outreach

Fish Monitoring

An underwater video camera was installed in Sonoma Water's Mirabel dam fish ladder on September 1 and operated until December 9, 2022 when the camera was removed for the season due to high flows. In total, 1,180 adult Chinook, 67 coho salmon, and 3 steelhead were observed in 2022. For context the long term average for the Chinook count at the Mirabel dam is 2,639. Salmon returns are strongly affected by the ocean conditions they experience when at sea. However, drought conditions in the Russian River likely contributed to the lower than average 2022 Chinook count as well. For a more comprehensive coho count please see information available online from the California Sea Grant Russian River Salmonid Monitoring program.

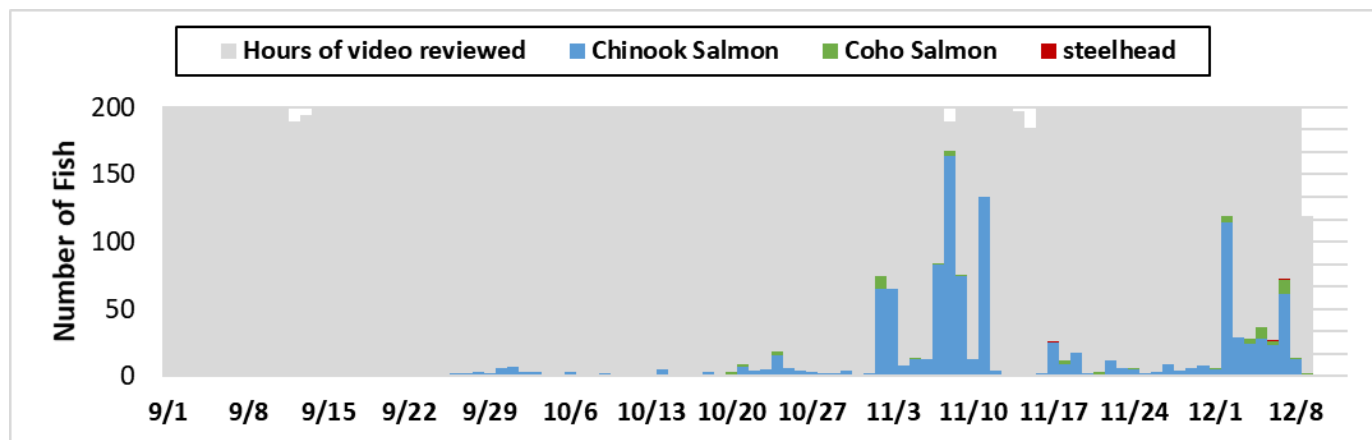


Figure 1. Number of adult salmonids observed passing the video monitoring system in the Mirabel Dam fish ladder.

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River closed on November 25, 2022. It self-breached on December 4, so the tentatively scheduled artificial breach event for December 5th was cancelled. [The maximum water surface elevation during this closure was 5.9 ft at the Jenner visitor center gage.](#)

The mouth of the Russian River closed on the afternoon of Monday, December 26, 2022, during the storm event and self-breached on Tuesday, December 27, 2022. The maximum water surface elevation was 8.9 ft at the Jenner gage during this closure.

Interim Flow Changes

On October 28, 2022, Sonoma Water filed Temporary Urgency Change Petitions with the State Water Resources Control Board, Division Water (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. On December 14, 2022, the Division issued an order approving Sonoma Water's Petitions. The order expires on June 12, 2023

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.

A draft Biological Assessment was submitted to NMFS and CDFW on December 9. A final Biological Assessment will be submitted in late February or early March.