Russian River Biological Opinion Update – March 6, 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 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.

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.

Phase 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's 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.

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.

Photo showing a portion of the newly constructed Reach 13 side channel after recent rainfall event. The original mainstem of Dry Creek is on the left and the newly constructed channel is on the right with downstream flow towards the bottom of the photo. Photo taken January 17, 2023.

Sonoma Water advertised the 13B inlet construction on February 16, 2023. 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 on March 14, 2023 in order to issue a notice to proceed in May and have construction start on 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 have been executed and submitted to the Corps for certification.

Habitat Monitoring and Maintenance

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. Most if the in-water data collection is on hold during higher wet-season flows and the monitoring staff is primarily processing data to quantify habitat areas and scores, create graphics, assign scores to habitat sites, determine fish use, and produce other related results. They are also conducting drone flights to evaluate the conditions at the constructed project sites following the high flows that occurred during the series of atmospheric rivers in late December and Early January.

Site Progression Monitoring Photo. Reach 14 site prior to construction. Mainstem of Dry Creek is within the tree line at the top of the photo. Note nesting pole in bottom left for reference. Photo taken July 19, 2018.

Site Progression Monitoring Photo. Reach 14 site during construction. Photo showing sheet pile installed to isolate construction area from mainstem of Dry Creek and the start of earthwork and log installation. Photo taken August 8, 2018.

Site Progression Monitoring Photo. Reach 14 site during construction. Photo showing sheet pile moved further into the constructed side channel to isolate the construction work area. Photo also shows the further progression of earthwork and log structure installation. Photo taken August 23, 2018.

Site Progression Monitoring Photo. Reach 14 site at completion of construction. Photo shows a portion of the completed side channel. Photo taken October 10, 2018.

Site Progression Monitoring Photo. Reach 14 site four years post-construction. Photo shows growth of riparian vegetation along the constructed side cannel as well as pool development within the site. Photo taken November 17, 2022.

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.

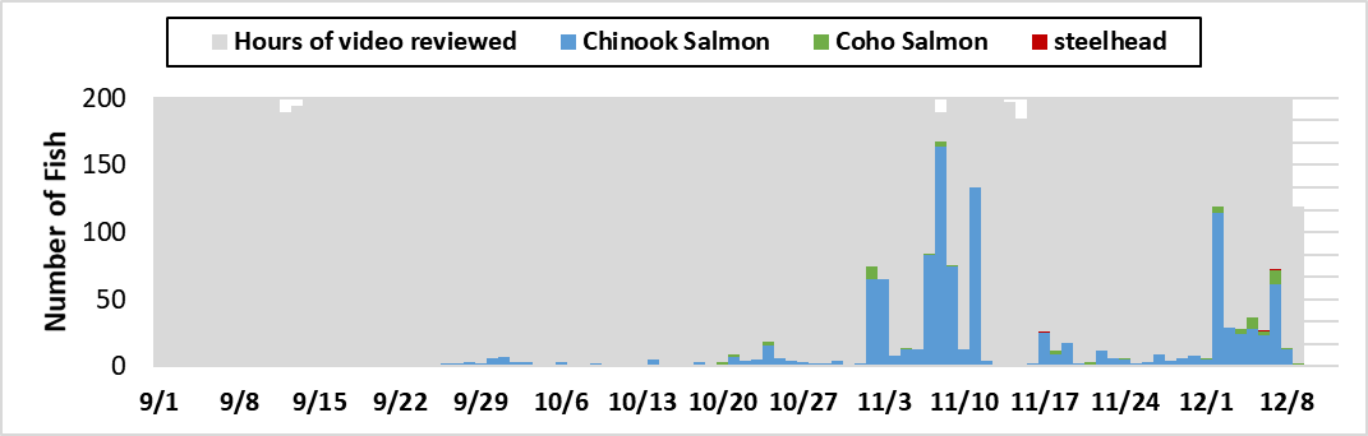

Figure 1. Number of adult salmonids observed passing the video monitoring system in the Mirabel Dam fish ladder.

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River is open. Sonoma Water will be working on the draft 2023 Adaptive Management Plan (AMP) and do not anticipate significant changes from the 2022 AMP.

Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods and Sonoma Water staff hosted the annual Pinniped Monitoring Volunteer Training on Thursday, February 23 from 11 am to 1 pm. The training was well attended by new and current volunteers.

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. Staff are addressing comments identified in workshops on Dry Creek habitat enhancement, estuary management, and Mirabel/Wohler operations and are discussing preparation of a final Biological Assessment with the USACE, NMFS and CDFW.