



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – May 1, 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](https://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.

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 lowest of the 3 bids received is currently being evaluated.

The Corps advertised 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 pre-bid site visit took place on March 21 and bids are due April 13th.

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 of 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. On March 15, the Army Corps began releasing water from Warm Springs Dam to evacuate water from the flood control pool in Lake Sonoma. The flood control release reached a maximum flow of 4,000 cfs, declined to 1,000 cfs on March 23, and has been sustained at 1,000 cfs since that date. The photos show sites in Reach 14 (close to the dam) at 4,000 cfs. The flood plain, enhanced with features like engineered log jams that are typically dry during low flows, are partially submerged and providing valuable refuge habitat for juvenile fish during these flood flow events.



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

Public Outreach

The Public Policy Facilitating Committee (PPFC) is holding its annual meeting on Wednesday, May 24 from 3 pm- 5 pm to discuss and take public comment on the Russian River Biological Opinion.

Location and details to follow closer to the meeting date.

Fish Monitoring

Between October and May, Sonoma Water fisheries crews conduct spawning ground surveys in Russian River tributaries under a grant from the CA Dept of Fish and Wildlife to implement the Coastal Monitoring Plan (CMP). CMP surveys have revealed very low numbers of spawning steelhead this season. If the trend continues, the 2022-23 spawning season will be the lowest return of natural spawning steelhead (fish returning to spawn in creeks instead of hatcheries) in a decade. Counts of steelhead returning to the hatcheries at Warm Springs and Coyote Valley Dams show the same trend (Table 1). Season totals in 2021-22 were low and returns of hatchery fish to date are on track to be even lower. In most years the total return of hatchery fish to both facilities exceeds 4,000 fish and can be as high as 10,000 fish.

COYOTE VALLEY	STEELHEAD
LAST WEEK TOTAL	7
YEAR TO DATE	181
LAST SEASON YEAR TO DATE	513
LAST SEASON TOTAL	549

WARM SPRINGS	STEELHEAD
LAST WEEK TOTAL	11
YEAR TO DATE	264
LAST SEASON YEAR TO DATE	388
LAST SEASON TOTAL	443

Table 1. Weekly and seasonal totals of adult hatchery origin steelhead that returned to Warm Springs Hatchery (Lake Sonoma) and the Coyote Valley Fish Facility (Lake Mendocino) on March 23, 2023. The table shows current returns to date and returns by the same date and the total number of fish that returned 2022.

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.



Photo March 22, 2023

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.

Based on the December 14, 2022 Division order and Sonoma Water's water rights permits, the water supply condition for the remainder of the calendar year will be *Normal*. As required by the Russian River Biological Opinion, Sonoma Water has filed Temporary Urgency Change Petitions with the Division requesting that the minimum instream flow requirement on the Upper Russian River be reduced from 185 cfs to 125 cfs and on the Lower Russian River be reduced from 125 cfs to 70 cfs from June 1 through October 31, 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 the Biological Assessment with the USACE, NMFS and CDFW.