



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – August 7, 2023

Sonoma Water is continually planning and implementing the Russian River Biological Opinion requirements. Below is a brief synopsis of the 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 currently being constructed in 2022 and 2023, Phase V is beginning construction in 2023 and 2024, and Phase VI is tentatively planned for construction in 2024 and 2025. 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, obtain appraisals for the value of the right-of-way compensation amounts, and prepare right-of-way compensation offers for the Phase VI projects.

Construction

The Corps is in the process of constructing Phase IV and V of the Dry Creek Project. Phase IV consists of sites in Reaches 10 and 13 of Dry Creek, and Phase V includes sites in Reaches 4C and 2A. Reaches are numbered according to approximate distance in miles from the confluence with the Russian River.

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 is being constructed in 2023 by Sonoma Water. Construction of the nine Reach 10 sites is currently underway. McCullough is clearing vegetation in work areas at multiple sites and constructing habitat features. Conditions at one of the sites changed during the wet 2022/2023 winter. Sonoma Water survey crews have provided new topography for the site, the monitoring staff have provided drone aerial photographs, and the design consultant (Inter-Fluve) is updating the design to accommodate the new existing condition. The revised design is currently being reviewed by the Corps and Sonoma Water.



Photograph taken on June 27, 2023, of habitat construction underway in Reach 10 of Dry Creek Phase IV.

Following a competitive bid process, Sonoma Water's Board of Directors awarded the construction of the 13B inlet project on May 9th to Rege Construction, and Sonoma Water issued a notice to proceed for June 12th. Rege expects to start construction on July 10th. Sonoma Water staff is currently conducting the necessary pre-construction biological surveys.

The Corps advertised Phase V of the Dry Creek Project on March 14, 2023, in order to issue a notice to proceed on June 8th to ROD Construction. ROD is currently working through their pre-construction submittals and tentatively plans to mobilize on July 25th.

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. Since early May and spring flows subsided, crews completed pre-construction monitoring on an upcoming Phase V project site in Reach 2, and post-effective flow monitoring on past projects in reaches 13, 8, and 7. Crews also collected drone aerial photographs of past projects in reaches 8, 5, and 4.



Sonoma Water habitat monitoring crew collecting data in Dry Creek, Photo taken May 16, 2023.



Sonoma Water habitat monitoring crew collecting data in Dry Creek, Photo taken May 18, 2023.

Public Outreach

Fish Monitoring

Sonoma Water conducts downstream migrant trapping each spring in tributaries to the mainstem Russian River (Mill, Dry, Mark West, Green Valley, Dutch Bill, Austin and Willow Creeks) as well the mainstem at the Mirabel dam site. Traps

operate on a continual basis typically beginning in March or April each spring and continuing through June or July. Downstream migrant trapping has ended for the spring in all but the mainstem Russian and Dry Creek. While results for steelhead and Chinook salmon captures were disappointingly low in 2023, catches of coho salmon were among the highest on record and included many natural-origin fish (smolts resulting from spawning in the wild).



Wild coho salmon smolt from Willow Creek.



Wild steelhead smolt from Dry Creek.

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River is open. The lagoon management season began on May 15 and ends on October 15. Biological (fisheries and pinnipeds) and water quality monitoring for the season is underway.

Interim Flow Changes

Based on Sonoma Water's water rights permits and State Water Resources Control Board Decision 1610, the water supply condition for the remainder of the calendar will be *Normal*. As required by the Russian River Biological Opinion, Sonoma Water 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. In response to this filing, the Division issued a Temporary Urgency Change Order (Order) on May 19, 2023. The Order replaces the order that was already in place, sets minimum instream flow requirements as requested, includes multiple monitoring and reporting requirements, and expires on October 15, 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 Biological Assessment was submitted to NMFS and CDFW and staff are revising the document in response to resource agency's comments.