



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – November 6, 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 being constructed 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 obtain appraisals for the value of the right-of-way compensation amounts, prepare right-of-way compensation offers and easement agreements, present the documents to the owners, and address owner comments and concerns.

Construction

The Corps, with support from Sonoma Water staff and the Design Consultant, 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 8 of the 9 Reach 10 sites and demobilized October 20th. The existing conditions at Site 10A1 changed substantially following the erosion that occurred during the 2022/2023 wet season. Inter-Fluve, the design consultant, subsequently revised the design of Site 10A1 to incorporate the new conditions. McCullough constructed the upstream end of the revised 10A1 design, however, the remaining portion will be constructed in 2024.



Photograph taken on October 20th, 2023, of habitat construction underway at the inlet to Site 10A1 in Reach 10 of Dry Creek Phase IV.



Photograph taken on October 16th, 2023 of Site 10A3 of Dry Creek habitat enhancements.



Photograph taken on October 10th, 2023 of Site 10B1 of Dry Creek habitat enhancements.

ROD Construction is requesting extensions to the in-stream work window and planning to complete the side channel in Reach 4C by mid-November. The ramp needed for site access off Dry Creek Road, the above-water portion of the new channel excavation, and the 4 connections to the Dry Creek mainstem have been completed. They are presently installing habitat structures in the side channel and grading it to full depth. ROD will winterize the site and finish in 2024 if unable to finish this season due to storm systems that prevent approval of additional in-stream work extensions.



Photograph taken on 10/25/23 showing partially completed inlet to the new side-channel habitat feature at site 4C.

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 June crews completed - post-effective flow monitoring on a past project in reach 14 (Weinstock) and began post-construction monitoring in reach 13 (Pedroncelli) that included collecting aerial photographs by drone. Information collected is also being used to prioritize and plan for maintenance activities such as invasive vegetation management, removal of nuisance sedimentation, and repair of flood damage or erosion that impairs project function.



Pre-construction drone photo of reach 13 enhancement reach (Pedroncelli), in Dry Creek. Photo taken June 20, 2022.



Post-construction drone photo of reach 13 enhancement reach (Pedroncelli) in Dry Creek. Photo taken September 6, 2023.

Public Outreach

Fish Monitoring

Sonoma Water installed a video camera at the Mirabel fish ladder on September 1, 2023. Video is recorded 24 hours a day. Video footage has been reviewed through October 27, 2023. To date 634 Chinook salmon have been observed. Sonoma Water has operated video cameras at the Mirabel dam since the year 2000. Based on this long-term data set the average number of Chinook returning to the Russian River is 2,641 fish annually. Last year 1,180 Chinook salmon were counted passing the Mirabel dam. The peak of the Chinook run typically occurs between mid-October and mid-November with large numbers of Chinook moving through the fish ladder following rain events.



An image of adult Chinook Salmon taken from video recorded on October 24, 2023.

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River is open. The lagoon management season ended on October 15. The river mouth closed on October 11, 2023, followed by a self-breach on October 15, 2023. The maximum water surface elevation in the lagoon was 5.06 ft at the Jenner visitor center gage. This was the first closure since December 26, 2022, with a self-breach on December 27, 2022.

The river mouth closed again on October 18 and was breached on October 26, 2023. The maximum water surface elevation in the lagoon was 8.77 ft.

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 of Water Rights (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 15, 2023. In response to this filing, the Division issued a Temporary Urgency Change Order (Order) on May 19, 2023. The Order expired on October 15. On October 12, 2023, Sonoma Water filed temporary urgency change petitions requesting that the water supply condition for the Russian River be determined based on storage thresholds at Lake Mendocino. This is in response to the significant reductions of Eel River water transferred through the Potter Valley Project that have recently occurred and

the need for the Russian River water supply condition be determined based on an index that is reflective of reservoir and hydrologic conditions in the Russian River watershed. Sonoma Water is requesting that the order approving the petitions become effective January 1, 2024. The Division is processing the petitions and Sonoma Water anticipates receiving an order temporarily approving its request prior to January 1, 2024.

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 on August 23, 2023.