



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – June 2, 2025

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.

Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Project

Habitat Monitoring and Maintenance

Sonoma Water Environmental Resources staff are preparing for 2025 monitoring of enhancement reach physical conditions, which occurs annually during the dry season and follows the Dry Creek Adaptive Management Plan. Staff also continue to work on long-term programmatic permit applications for maintenance of previously constructed sites. Maintenance to address sedimentation impacts in the Reach 8 area as well as minor issues in other reaches is expected to occur during the 2025 in-stream work season between June 15 and October 15. Sonoma Water Environmental Resources staff are finalizing terms of an agreement going to the Board of Directors in July 2025 for their consideration and approval to execute a contract with a construction contractor for the Reach 8 maintenance activities. Lastly, Sonoma Water Engineering and Environmental Resources staff are also working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to finalize the Operations and Maintenance Manual for the Dry Creek enhancement projects constructed by the USACE from 2022 to 2024.

Public Outreach

Sonoma Water staff are currently reviewing the terms and conditions associated with the new 2025 Russian River Biological Opinion to fully understand implementation requirements. Sonoma Water will provide additional information and coordinate with partner agencies and stakeholders as staff continue to review the 2025 Biological Opinion.

Fish Monitoring

Fisheries field efforts are focused on downstream migrating juvenile salmon and steelhead. Sonoma Water biologists are conducting studies with surgically implanted acoustic transmitters to determine survival and migration rates in the mainstem Russian River and several tributary stream.

Downstream migrant traps have been installed in Willow Creek, Dutch Bill Creek, Green Valley Creek, Mill Creek, Austin, Creek, and Dry Creek. The trap with the highest coho catch to date is Willow Creek with 3,486 individuals. This is the highest catch for this date on record for Willow Creek coho but most fish are newly emerged young-of-the-year. At this time next year, Sonoma Water hopes to see these fish as 1 year old smolts headed to the ocean. The next highest Willow Creek catch to date was in 2022 with 2,316 individuals. The trap with the highest Chinook smolt catch is Dry Creek with 2,070 individuals. This is a similar catch to last year at this date, but below the long-term average. In the last 17 years 2025 would be ranked 12th, but that does not account for differences in trap installation date. Steelhead catches are low when summing across all of the sample sites. This is the lowest steelhead trap catch to date since 2010 when Sonoma Water began operating at the current trap locations.



Juvenile Chinook salmon (foreground) and coho salmon (background) captured in a Russian River downstream migrant trap.

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River is open as of May 21, 2025. Pinniped baseline monitoring resumed in mid-March and it is currently harbor seal pupping season. Fisheries and water quality monitoring began in April. Downstream migrant trapping to monitor juvenile salmonid migration has begun. Water quality monitoring, including deployment of data sondes, which collect vertical profiles of water temperature, dissolved oxygen, and salinity, and grab sampling for nutrients will continue through mid-October.

Interim Flow Changes

On August 20, 2024, Sonoma Water filed new temporary urgency change petitions with the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) requesting that storage thresholds at Lake Mendocino be used as the hydrologic index for determining minimum instream flow requirements in the Russian River and Dry Creek starting November 1, 2024. Sonoma Water filed similar petitions in October of 2023, which the Division issued an order approving in December 2023. The State Water Board issued the Order approving the temporary urgency change petitions for a 180-day term, which expired on April 29, 2025. Based on the hydrologic index in State Water Board order Decision 1610, the Russian River continues to be in a *Normal* water supply conditions.

On March 10, 2025, Sonoma Water filed new temporary urgency change petitions with the State Water Board requesting: (1) storage thresholds at Lake Mendocino be used as the hydrologic index for determining the minimum instream flow requirements; and (2) summertime minimum instream flow requirements in the Russian River be reduced if the water supply condition is *Normal* per the 2008 Russian River Biological opinion to increase the quality and quantity of rearing habitat for Chinook Salmon and steelhead. The State Water Board noticed the petitions on April 22, 2025. An order from the State Water Board approving the petitions is still pending.

New Biological Opinion

On April 29, 2025, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) issued a second Russian River Biological Opinion to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Sonoma Water, and the Mendocino County Russian River Flood Control and Water Conservation Improvement District. The new 2025 Russian River Biological Opinion has a 10-year term and covers the USACE and Sonoma Water's operations and maintenance activities, including water supply, flood control, channel maintenance and habitat restoration in the Russian River watershed. Key elements of the Proposed Action evaluated in the new 2025 Russian River Biological Opinion include: continued habitat enhancement efforts in Dry Creek; revised Russian River Estuary adaptive management; studies to learn more about migration and survival of hatchery and wild salmonids; reservoir flood control and water supply operations at Coyote Valley Dam (Lake Mendocino) and Warm Springs Dam (Lake Sonoma); and continued improvements to reservoir management. Specifically, these improvements

include Forecast Informed Reservoir Operations (FIRO) at Coyote Valley Dam (Lake Mendocino) and Warm Springs Dam (Lake Sonoma) and time-limited changes to the Russian River Hydrologic Index (water year classifications) to be based on Lake Mendocino storage thresholds rather than Lake Pillsbury storage in the Eel River watershed, and request, via interim petitions, changes to D1610 minimum flows during Normal and Dry hydrologic conditions in a manner consistent with the Reasonable and Prudent Alternative (RPA) from the 2008 Biological Opinion. These changes were included in the Proposed Action to avoid potential take of listed salmonids. NMFS determined that these actions will improve water reliability and benefit salmon and steelhead through enhanced coldwater storage resulting in sustained cooler water temperatures during the summer and fall rearing season and greater flexibility to release water to facilitate fish migration. NMFS concluded that the Proposed Action “is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence” of Central California Coast coho salmon, California Coastal Chinook salmon, Central California Coast steelhead, or Southern Resident Killer Whale, nor is it likely to destroy or adversely modify their designated critical habitat. This is a significant change from the 2008 Biological Opinion, which was a jeopardy opinion; the 2025 Russian River Biological Opinion is a non-jeopardy opinion, which reflects improvements in operations and conservation measures.