



## Russian River Biological Opinion Update – August 4, 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](https://SonomaWater.org).

### Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Project

#### Habitat Monitoring and Maintenance

Sonoma Water Environmental Resources staff are monitoring enhancement reach physical conditions, which occurs annually during the dry season and follows the Dry Creek Adaptive Management Plan. Environmental Resources staff plan to monitor 14 enhancement reaches during the 2025 monitoring season. By the end of July, crews completed six enhancement reaches (in reaches 2, 4, 10, and 13) and began two others (in reaches 2 and 14). Staff continue to work on long-term programmatic permit applications for maintenance of previously constructed sites. Permits were obtained for maintenance activities to address sedimentation impacts in the Reach 8 area. The Reach 8 maintenance work is anticipated to occur during the 2025 in-stream work season between June 15 and October 15. Environmental Resources staff finalized an agreement with a construction contractor for the Reach 8 maintenance activities, which was approved by the Board of Directors on July 8, 2025. Lastly, Sonoma Water Engineering and Environmental Resources staff are 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.

### Fish Monitoring

Environmental Resources staff began snorkel surveys in selected creeks across the Russian River basin on June 5, 2025, with the goal of assessing the spatial structure of the juvenile salmonid populations. This goal was accomplished by teams of technicians hiking upstream through creeks and snorkeling a sample of pools to count juvenile coho salmon and steelhead in two separate passes per reach. To date, surveys have been completed in 45 reaches across the basin, and 12,262 coho juveniles and 15,359 steelhead juveniles have been counted. Of the creeks surveyed so far, Willow Creek has had the largest number of coho juveniles (2,995) and Pena Creek has had the largest number of steelhead juveniles (3,007). Counts of coho juveniles are generally high compared to previous seasons, and steelhead counts are about average. This is consistent with adult spawner data collected in the fall and winter of 2024/25 when a record number of spawning coho were counted in the basin (and especially high numbers in Willow Creek).



A technician snorkels a pool in Austin Creek looking for juvenile Coho Salmon and steelhead.

## Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River is open as of July 29, 2025. Pinniped baseline, fisheries, and water quality monitoring is ongoing. Downstream migrant trapping is winding down. Seining is scheduled for September. 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 March 10, 2025, Sonoma Water filed new temporary urgency change petitions (petitions) with the State Water Resources Control 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 issued an order approving changes requested in the petitions on June 27, 2025. The order will be in effect for 180 days. Because Russian River hydrologic conditions are currently Normal, the required State Board minimum flows are now 125 cfs and 70 cfs in upper and lower Russian River respectively.



## New 2025 Russian River 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 cold-water 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.

## 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.