

# PD Editorial: Two-basin solution offers water security

August 4, 2025 WAC TAC Meeting  
Agenda Item 12

*A historic water-sharing agreement advanced last week commits Eel and Russian river stakeholders to a two-basin solution.*



Cape Horn Dam would be dismantled under PG&E's plan to abandon its license for the Potter Valley Project. (Kent Porter — The Press Democrat, 2024)

## THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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2 minute read

PG&E, which owns the plumbing connecting the Eel and Russian rivers, couldn't find a buyer for the Potter Valley Project.

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It's easy to understand why. The century-old hydro power plant at the northeastern tip of Mendocino County is obsolete. It hasn't generated a single kilowatt of electricity in four years and would need millions of dollars in repairs before the turbines could be restarted.

Even then, the Potter Valley Project would be a money loser.

Yet it remains a vital source of water for Mendocino and northern Sonoma County.

On Friday, PG&E filed an application with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to surrender its license and decommission two dams that pool Eel River water and divert it through the Potter Valley powerhouse into the East Fork of the Russian River.

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# REPORT

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There is opposition from water users on the upper Russian River and property owners at Lake Pillsbury. But with no prospective buyers — a last ditch appeal to the federal Bureau of Reclamation was rejected — it's a near certainty that Cape Horn and Scott dams will be dismantled.

Still, removal will take several years — enough time to reengineer facilities at Potter Valley so diversions into the Russian River can continue after the dams are gone.

A historic water-sharing agreement advanced last week commits conservation groups, the Round Valley Indian tribes, state fish and wildlife officials and Sonoma, Mendocino and Humboldt counties to a two-basin solution.

The key objectives are:

- Improving fish habitat and migration on the Eel River, which will become the longest free-flowing river in California.
- Maintaining diversions to support water supplies, fisheries and water quality in the Russian River basin.

For farmers and city dwellers in Sonoma and Mendocino counties, preserving Eel River diversions is nothing short of a lifeline.

For conservation and fishery groups, restoring flows on the Eel fulfills a decades-long goal of revitalizing an iconic salmon stream that is now ranked as one of the nation's most endangered rivers.

For the Indigenous people of Round Valley, the deal includes recognition of valuable Eel River water rights and annual lease payments that promise a degree of economic security.

The two-basin solution promises Russian River users a water supply for 30 years, with the potential for a 20-year renewal, and perhaps more if Eel River restoration goals are met.

There are challenges ahead, too.

Diversions from the Eel, once exceeding 100,000 acre-feet a year, but now about 40,000, will drop to an estimated 30,000. Also, diversions will only occur during high winter flows, so additional storage capacity is needed in the Russian River watershed. That could include raising Coyote Dam.

The cost of added storage will be in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and much of it would fall on water users, some of whom are accustomed to dipping a straw in the river and paying nothing. Sonoma Water officials note the state already committed \$18 million to support the two-basin solution, and they pledge to seek other public funds to limit the financial hit on North Bay water users.

And, as Sonoma County Supervisor David Rabbitt told his colleagues last week, "The cost of doing nothing far exceeds the cost of what we're getting into."

Indeed, Lake Mendocino and the upper Russian River could run nearly dry in some years without the diversions. Only the two-basin solution will keep the water flowing.

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