



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – February 2, 2026

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

Staff continue to work on long-term programmatic permit applications for maintenance of previously constructed sites and plan maintenance for several enhancement reaches in 2026 to improve habitat conditions and project performance. Sonoma Water Design 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

Radio Telemetry Study

In February, Sonoma Water will conduct the second year of a radio telemetry study designed to estimate steelhead smolt survival in the upper Russian River. A total of 150 steelhead smolts will be surgically implanted with radio transmitters (radio tags) and released into the Russian River near Ukiah, CA. The radio tags have a battery life of approximately 155 days and will allow biologists to estimate survival rates and travel times across six study reaches between Ukiah and Duncan's Mills.



Photo: A radio tagged steelhead smolt. Inset photo shows a radio tag.

Spawner Surveys



Environmental Resources staff began spawner surveys in select tributaries of the Russian River on November 17, following multiple rainstorms that created sufficient flows to reconnect streams and open up spawning habitat for returning adult fish. As of January 21, staff have completed 187 surveys in 23 tributaries throughout the lower Russian River basin (downstream of Maacama Creek).

To date, staff have recorded 31 Coho redds, 18 steelhead redds, 16 Chinook redds and 31 redds that could not be identified to species. Staff have also recorded 25 live Coho, 8 Coho carcasses, 22 live steelhead, 2 steelhead carcasses, 17 live Chinook, and 51 Chinook carcasses. An additional 18 live salmonids and 16 salmonid carcasses were recorded that could not be identified to species. Following the initial mid-November rainfall events, several weeks of dry weather reduced flows in many tributaries, resulting in channel disconnections.

Photo: A fisheries technician with a Coho carcass found during a spawner survey.

preventing fish from moving upstream into spawning habitats. Fortunately, large atmospheric river events in late-December and early-January brought much-needed flows that re-connected spawning fish with habitat that was previously inaccessible.

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River is open as of January 22, 2026. Monitoring for water quality at Willow Creek stations is continuing; all other monitoring has been completed and will resume in the spring. Pinniped baseline monitoring has concluded for the season and will resume in mid-March 2026 for the harbor seal pupping season. Sonoma Water and Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods will be hosting the annual volunteer training for the Pinniped Monitoring Program on February 10, with a field training scheduled for February 18. Details are available at <https://stewardscr.org/events/2026-pinniped-monitoring-volunteer-training/>.

Interim Flow Changes

On October 3, 2025, Sonoma Water filed temporary urgency change petitions (petitions) with the State Water Resources Control Board (State Board) requesting storage thresholds at Lake Mendocino be used as the hydrologic index for determining the minimum instream flow requirements in the Russian River and Dry Creek. The State Water Board issued an order approving changes requested in the petitions on December 23, 2025. The order expires on June 21, 2026. Based on the Lake Mendocino storage hydrologic index approved in the order, the water supply condition remained *Normal* as of February 1. The water supply condition will be reassessed on March 1.

2025 Russian River Biological Opinion

On April 29, 2025, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) issued a second Russian River Biological Opinion to the USACE, Sonoma Water, and the Mendocino County Russian River Flood Control and Water Conservation Improvement District. The 2025 Russian River Biological Opinion has a ten-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.

The 2025 Russian River Biological Opinion requires that Sonoma Water and USACE form designated working groups and technical advisory committees that meet at least once within four months of issuance of the Biological Opinion. Inter-agency workgroups focused on Lake Mendocino turbidity, Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma reservoir operations, Upper and Lower River fish migration and survival studies, Dry Creek habitat enhancement, and Russian River estuary management work groups all convened and held meetings in advance of the August 29, 2025, requirement. The frequency of regular workgroup meetings is generally monthly to quarterly. Some groups, like reservoir operations and estuary management, guide adaptive management actions and can meet more frequently as changing watershed conditions and fish life cycle needs require. All working groups and technical advisory committees began meeting in summer 2025 and their work is ongoing.

Public Outreach

A Dry Creek Community Meeting was held on January 12 and the Public Policy Facilitating Committee (PPFC) convened on January 21, 2026, to learn about the 2025 Russian River Biological Opinion and next steps for its implementation. The PPFC presentations will be posted to

<https://www.sonomawater.org/biological-opinion-outreach>.