



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – May 4, 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](https://www.sonomawater.org).

Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Project

Habitat Monitoring and Maintenance

Environmental Resources staff submitted long term programmatic permit applications to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) in early March. The applications are currently under review by the agencies. Permits would authorize maintenance work in 2026 at previously constructed habitat enhancement reaches. This includes maintaining hydraulic connectivity and the structural integrity of habitat elements to support rearing habitat for juvenile coho salmon and steelhead. Sonoma Water Design Engineering and Environmental Resources staff are working with the USACE to finalize the Operations and Maintenance Manual for the Dry Creek enhancement projects constructed by the USACE from 2022 to 2024. Additionally, Sonoma Water maintenance staff installed willow cuttings on three streambank stabilization sites and are installing irrigation systems to facilitate plant establishment.

Fish Monitoring

Spawner Surveys

Environmental Resources staff began spawner surveys in select tributaries of the Russian River on November 17, 2025, following multiple rainstorms that created sufficient flows to reconnect streams and open up spawning habitat for returning adult fish. As of April 23, 2026, staff have completed 534 surveys in 23 tributaries throughout the lower Russian River basin (downstream of Maacama Creek).

To date, staff have recorded 39 Coho salmon redds, 166 steelhead redds, 16 Chinook salmon redds and 75 redds that could not be identified to species. Staff also recorded 28 live Coho, 11 Coho carcasses, 194 live steelhead, 13 steelhead carcasses, 17 live Chinook, and 53 Chinook carcasses. An additional 41 live salmonids and 36 salmonid carcasses were recorded that could not be identified to species. Late season rains prevented surveys on one or two days in recent weeks but did not seem to significantly increase spawning activity. Staff continue to observe some steelhead spawning, though it has been mostly confined to lower Mill Creek and Porter Creek. This week will be the final round of surveys for the season, after which data will be corrected and estimates of redd abundance will be calculated.

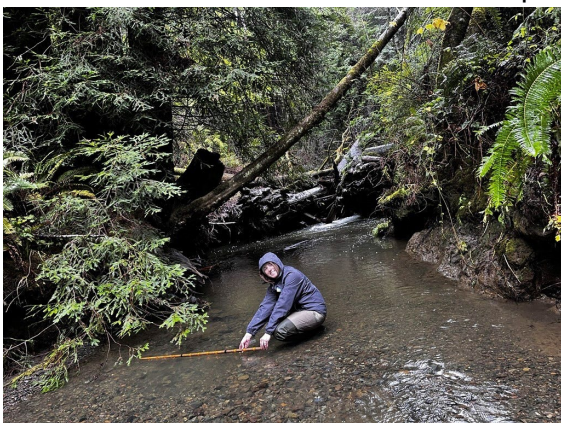


Photo: Fisheries technician measuring a salmonid redd found during a spawner survey in Willow Creek.

Steelhead Smolt Survival Study

The steelhead smolt survival study utilizes radio telemetry tags and receivers to estimate steelhead smolt survival and migration timing at a variety of flows in sections of the Russian River mainstem from Coyote Valley Fish Hatchery to Duncan's Mills. On February 13, 2026, a group of 70 radio tagged smolts were released

from the hatchery. As of April 21, 2026, 64 of the 70 smolts were detected in Ukiah, 42 in Hopland, 26 in Alexander Valley, 21 at Mirabel Dam, and 18 at Duncans Mills. Average daily flow at Hopland was 232 cfs on the day of release. Flow at Hopland three days after release increased following rain events to 1,360 cfs and to 8,650 cfs 12 days after release. A second group of 76 radio tagged smolts were released from the hatchery on March 13, 2026. As of April 21, 2026, 54 of the smolts were detected in Ukiah, 35 in Hopland, 15 in Alexander Valley, 10 at Mirabel Dam, and 7 at Duncans Mills. Average daily flow at Hopland on the day of release was 350 cfs and has remained below 500 cfs since the release. The raw number of detections reported here for each site are not survival estimates since these detections do not yet account for detection efficiency, delayed emigration, or tag retention.



Photo: Fisheries technician surgically implanting a radio telemetry tag in a steelhead smolt.

Downstream Migrant Trapping

Environmental Resources staff installed Downstream Migrant Traps (DSMTs) beginning March 10 to monitor juvenile salmonids as they move downstream. The Dry Creek trap has been operating since April and approximately 500 Chinook smolts have been recorded. Staff plan to install two additional traps, targeting out-migrating Chinook smolts, at mainstem Russian River locations, one in the upper river near Ukiah and one at the Mirabel dam. In addition, traps are operating in four tributary streams, Willow, Dutch Bill, Green Valley, and Mill creeks, for the purpose of calculating abundance estimates of out-migrating Coho smolts. As of April 22, 2026, 1,395 coho smolts, 165 coho young-of-year (YOY), 53 steelhead smolts, and 58 steelhead YOY have been recorded.

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River is open as of April 29, 2026. Monitoring for water quality at Willow Creek stations is continuing and deployment of datasondes to capture vertical profiles of water quality conditions in multiple locations within the Estuary has begun. Weekly pinniped baseline monitoring resumed in mid-March 2026 for the harbor seal pupping season. Harbor seals pups have been observed at the Jenner haulout. Sonoma Water biologists and Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods volunteers are conducting the baseline surveys.

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 changed from *Normal* to *Dry* as of April 16. The water supply condition will be reassessed on May 1.

On March 20, 2026, Sonoma Water filed new petitions with the State Board requesting storage thresholds at Lake Mendocino continue to be used as the hydrologic index for determining the minimum instream flow requirements in the Russian River and Dry Creek. The State Board noticed the petitions on March 26, 2026. The public comment period closed on April 27, 2026.

Public Outreach

There are no public meetings scheduled at this time.