Russian River Biological Opinion Update – June 1, 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

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. These applications are under agency review. Once approved, permits will authorize maintenance work in 2026 at previously constructed habitat enhancement reaches. Planned maintenance includes preserving hydraulic connectivity and maintaining the structural integrity of habitat elements to support rearing habitat for juvenile coho salmon and steelhead. USACE has issued the Dry Creek Restoration Project Interim Operation, Maintenance, Repair, Replacement, and Rehabilitation (OMRR&R) Manual for the reaches constructed by the USACE between 2022 to 2024. The Final OMRRR&R Manual will be issued after repairs are completed at the three enhancement sites damaged by the sustained high flows that occurred during the 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 water years.

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 produced sufficient flows to reconnect streams and open up spawning habitat for returning adult fish. The final survey of the 2025-2026 spawner season was completed on May 4, 2026. This season, staff completed 549 surveys in 23 tributaries throughout the lower Russian River basin (downstream of Maacama Creek).

Staff recorded 39 Coho salmon redds, 169 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. Coho redd counts this season were lower than average, but this outcome was not entirely unexpected. 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 Coho redd counts this season were lower than average, but this outcome was not totally entirely unexpected. The 2022-2023 Coho redd counts were the lowest we have recorded in the last 13 years monitoring, and those fish would have been the parents of the fish returning as adults to spawn this season. Steelhead redd counts were slightly better than average, but slightly lower than last season.

Photo: A fisheries technician collects data on a steelhead carcass found during a spawner survey in Mark West 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 May 14, 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 May 14, 54 of the smolts were detected in Ukiah, 36 in Hopland, 16 in Alexander Valley, 10 at Mirabel Dam, and 8 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: A fisheries technician displays a freshly tagged steelhead smolt.

Coho Smolt Survival Study

Juvenile coho were tagged with acoustic telemetry tags at the Warm Springs Fish Hatchery and at the downstream migrant traps (DSMTs) on Dutch Bill, Green Valley, Mill, and Willow creeks between April 22 and May 18. These tags and the 27 acoustic receivers deployed between the mouths of Mill Creek and the mouth of the Russian River allow for estimation of coho smolt survival and migration timing. In total, 1,173 juvenile coho were tagged at the hatchery or DSMTs. At the Warm Springs Fish Hatchery, 829 juvenile coho were tagged and held for 1 week before being released into Dry (n = 400), Dutch Bill (n = 96), Green Valley (n = 141) Mill (n = 96), and Willow creeks (n = 96). Tagging at the DSMTs occurred between April 27 and May 11. During this period, 182 coho were tagged at Dutch Bill, 6 coho were tagged at Green Valley, 32 coho were tagged at Mill, and 124 coho were tagged at Willow Creek. All coho tagged at the DSMTs were held temporarily in release boxes in the streams and were released the same day between the hours of 7:30pm and 9:00pm.

Downstream Migrant Trapping

Environmental Resources staff installed DSMTs beginning March 10 to monitor juvenile salmonids as they move downstream. The Dry Creek trap has been operating since April and 1,670 Chinook smolts have been recorded. The 2025 Russian River Biological Opinion directed Sonoma Water to operate a trap in the upper Russian River to monitor salmonid smolts as they move downstream and out of the upper Russian River. On May 13, Sonoma Water installed a downstream migrant trap on the mainstem Russian River near Hopland, CA. This is the first season Sonoma Water has operated a trap at this location. As of May 18, 1,061 Chinook smolts have been caught at the Hopland trap. In addition, traps are operating in four tributary streams, Willow, Dutch Bill, and Mill creeks, for the purpose of calculating abundance estimates of out-migrating Coho smolts. As of May 18, 2,790 coho smolts, 193 coho young-of-year (YOY), 70 wild steelhead smolts, and 575 steelhead YOY have been recorded when combining catches across all traps. Sonoma Water has suspended fishing the Green Valley Creek trap for the duration of the 2026 trapping season. Staff installed a downstream migrant trap at the Mirabel dam on May 26.

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River closed on May 25, 2026, and remains closed as of May 26. 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 seal 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 the changes requested in the petitions on December 23, 2025. That order was superseded when the spring petitions, filed on March 20, 2026, were approved on May 21, 2026.

Sonoma Water filed the March 20 petitions with the State Board to request the summertime reduction in minimum instream flow requirements in the mainstem of the Russian River under a *Normal* water supply condition and to continue usage of the storage thresholds at Lake Mendocino 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 with a public comment period that closed on April 27, 2026. The petitioned changes were approved for 180 days in the order issued on May 21. This continues the use of the hydrologic index until November 16, 2026. Because the Lake Mendocino storage hydrologic index has resulted in the designation of a *Dry* water supply condition that will continue through the summer, the Russian River will not be operated under the reduced minimum instream flow requirements specified for *Normal* water supply conditions in the 2025 Russian River Biological Opinion.

Public Outreach

There are no public meetings scheduled at this time.