



Russian River Biological Opinion Update – October 5, 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 (CDFW), the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (Regional Board), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in early March. In late July, the North Coast Regional Board issued a Water Quality Certification for the Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Maintenance Program. The other applications are under agency review. Once approved, permits will authorize maintenance work, as needed.

Fish Monitoring

Snorkel Surveys

Environmental Resources staff began snorkel surveys in select tributaries of the Russian River on June 4, 2026, with the goal of assessing the spatial structure of juvenile salmonid populations. From early June to mid-



August, teams of technicians hiked upstream through predetermined sections (reaches) of creeks and snorkeled a sample of pool habitats to count juvenile coho and steelhead in two separate passes per reach. As of September 2, staff have completed 58 reaches in 39 different creeks, documenting 6,116 coho juveniles and 25,257 steelhead juveniles. Among the surveyed reaches, Green Valley and Purrington Creeks had the highest number of coho (1,450 and 749 respectively), while Pena and Porter creeks had the highest number of steelhead (4,975 and 2,875 respectively). Steelhead juvenile counts were the highest recorded since the previous peak of over 40,000 in

2019. Coho juvenile counts were lower by over 50% compared to the 2025 season, but similar to most other years since surveys began (2013).

Photo: A fisheries technician snorkels a pool in Ward Creek (an Austin Creek tributary).

Electrofishing Surveys



Environmental Resources staff have completed electrofishing surveys in Green Valley, Mill, and Willow Creeks for the 2026 season. These electrofishing surveys are completed annually in the four life cycle monitoring streams and their tributaries. Electrofishing surveys are used to estimate juvenile steelhead abundance, calibrate our late summer snorkel counts, and get PIT (passive integrated transponder) tags into steelhead that will eventually migrate to the ocean and inform our steelhead smolt estimate. The remaining surveys (Dutch Bill and Purrington Creeks) will conclude by October 15, 2026.

Photo: Fisheries technicians measure a juvenile steelhead before tagging it on Green Valley Creek.

Chinook Video Monitoring



Environmental Resources staff installed a video camera in the Mirabel fish ladder on September 1, 2026, to monitor adult salmon and steelhead that return to the Russian River to spawn. Video footage began being reviewed starting September 2. Typically, Environmental Resources staff do not see many fish until October or November. Although early, staff have seen three Chinook swimming upstream through the Mirabel Dam fish ladder this season including this first fish on September 4. Staff have reviewed footage through the 19th. The camera can be operated until the Mirabel Dam is deflated which occurs when the flow in the mainstem Russian River is predicted to be above 1,600 cfs (typically mid-November to mid-December). Sonoma Water has operated a video camera in the mainstem Russian River since 2000.

Photo: The first Chinook of the 2026-2027 season, seen on the Mirabel dam fish ladder camera on September 4, 2026.

Russian River Estuary Management Project

The mouth of the Russian River is currently open. Monitoring for water quality at Willow Creek stations and deployment of datasondes to capture vertical profiles of water quality conditions in multiple locations is continuing. Sonoma Water and a consultant deployed water quality data loggers to monitor potential freshwater seeps at two locations in the estuary. Weekly pinniped baseline monitoring at the Jenner haulout will continue until October 15. Sonoma Water biologists and Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods volunteers are conducting the baseline surveys. Fisheries seining surveys in the Russian River Estuary are currently being conducted and discussed below.

Estuary Seining

Environmental resources staff began seining in the Russian River Estuary on April 21, 2026. Staff expect to complete seining for the season on September 29. To date, 42 seine pulls in the lower, middle, and upper estuary have been completed. So far, staff have captured and applied PIT tags to three wild steelhead. The largest number of non-salmonids captured thus far is 2,600 topsmelt. Other captured non-salmonids include bay shrimp, sculpin, stickleback, shiner surfperch, largemouth bass, American shad, starry flounder, bluegill, green crab, and bay pipefish. The goal of estuary seining is to identify the different species of fish utilizing the Russian River Estuary and estimate estuarine growth in captured salmonids.



Photos: Fisheries technicians sort through a freshly hauled seine net full of fish.

Public Outreach

There are no public meetings scheduled at this time.