

Biological Opinion News



January 2011



Steelhead trout being monitored in Willow Creek, Fall 2010

The Russian River Instream Flow and Restoration Project (RRIFR) is a comprehensive long-term effort to complete the requirements of NMFS's Russian River Biological Opinion. The Biological Opinion News is a quarterly electronic publication providing short updates on the project's progress. Please go to www.sonomacountywater.org/rrifr to be put on the newsletter mailing list.

Fish Flow Project Kicks Off Environmental Process with Three Open Houses

Introduction

The National Marine Fisheries Service's Russian River Biological Opinion requires the Sonoma County Water Agency to change minimum instream flow levels in the Russian River and Dry Creek during the summer months to enhance habitat for coho salmon and steelhead. The Water Agency has created the Fish Habitat Flows and Water Rights Project (Fish Flow Project) to address these requirements. An Environmental Impact Report (EIR) is required for this project by the California Environmental Quality Act.

Summary

A Notice of Preparation for an EIR on the Fish Flow Project was released in November 2010 and three public scoping meetings were held.

The meetings were attended by over 70 people. Common questions at the open-house meetings included the potential impacts of flow changes on recreation and how salmon will benefit from lower flows in the Russian River and Dry Creek.

What's Next

More than 40 comments were received during the 45-day comment period, which closed on November 15th, 2010. A summary of comments will be provided to the Water Agency's Board of Directors later this year. It is anticipated that a draft EIR will be released in summer 2012.

Inside:
Draft EIR Announcement, Facts & Figures, Dry Creek Project



Estuary Management Plan Environmental Review Released

Overview

A plan to change the way the Water Agency manages the Russian River estuary from May 15 through October 15 is the subject of a draft environmental analysis released on December 15th, 2010.

The purpose of the project - which includes a new way of managing the sandbar that often closes the mouth of the Russian River as it flows into the Pacific Ocean near Jenner - is to create a more productive environment for young steelhead.

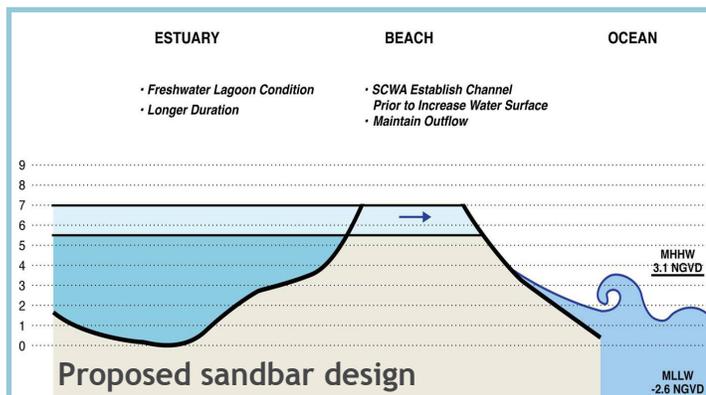
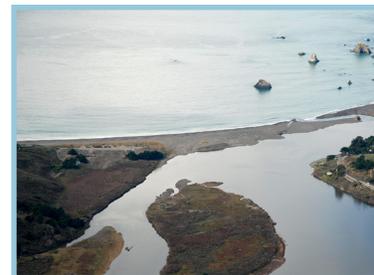
Since the mid-1990s, the Water Agency has artificially breached the sandbar when it closes and water levels in the estuary threaten low-lying properties. When the sandbar is breached, salt water from the ocean mingles with river water, creating saline conditions. In the Biological Opinion, NMFS biologists found that the fresh water lagoon that is created when the sandbar closes naturally would help threatened steelhead during summer months. In order to reduce the risk of flooding while maintaining this fresh water lagoon, the Water Agency worked with consultants to create a plan for sculpting the sandbar that will allow river water to flow over the top but keep ocean water from entering.

Comment Period and Public Hearing

A public hearing on the draft EIR is scheduled for Tuesday, January 18, 6 p.m. - 9 p.m. at the Jenner Community Hall, 10398 Highway 1. Staff from Environmental Science Associates (which prepared the EIR) will provide an overview of the project and review possible impacts on wildlife, fish, water quality, recreation and other resources. People will have an opportunity to provide oral or written comments at the meeting. People can also provide written comments until 5 p.m., February 14, 2011.

Comments can be emailed to estuaryproject@esassoc.com or mailed to the Sonoma County Water Agency, Attention: Jessica Martini-Lamb, 404 Aviation Blvd., Santa Rosa, CA, 95403. Correspondence should include a name, address, and telephone number. Questions regarding the draft EIR should be directed to Jessica Martini-Lamb at (707) 547-1903.

Public Hearing
January 18, 2011
Jenner Community Center
6:00pm-9:00pm



Since the mid-1990s, the Water Agency has opened the sandbar when flooding threatened low-lying properties. The biological opinion requires when the sandbar closes, the Water Agency to employ a design that will reduce flooding risks while allowing the creation of a freshwater lagoon to enhance steelhead habitat. Harbor seals and other pinnipeds will be closely monitored, as will water quality and fisheries.

Latest Facts & Figures

Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement

Overview

Dry Creek meanders 14-miles from Warm Springs Dam at Lake Sonoma to the Russian River. The creek is home to endangered coho salmon and threatened steelhead and Chinook salmon. Dry Creek also serves as the conduit for carrying water from Lake Sonoma to the Russian River, helping the Water Agency meet the demands of its customers. The Biological Opinion found that summertime flows in Dry Creek are too high for young steelhead and coho.

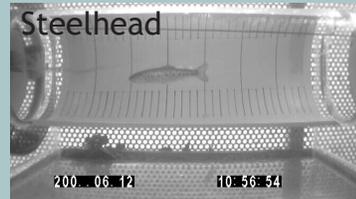
The Project

The Biological Opinion requires the Water Agency - with funding assistance from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers - to enhance six miles of habitat on Dry Creek. The purpose of habitat enhancement is to provide refuge from the swift summertime flows for young coho and steelhead.

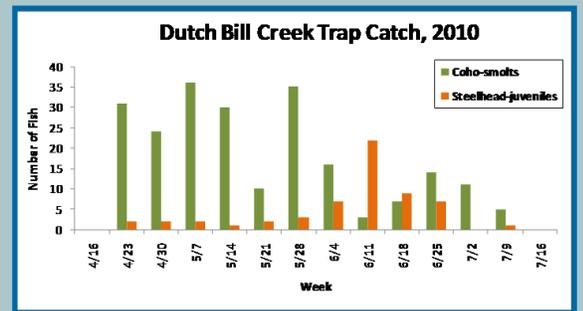
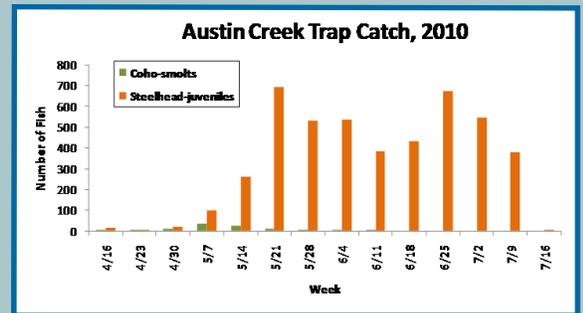
What's Next

A "Dry Creek Historical Conditions" report was released in 2010, and a habitat enhancement plan will be released later this winter. A group of willing landowners along one mile of the creek with properties near Lambert Bridge have stepped forward to work with the Water Agency on a Dry Creek Habitat Enhancement Demonstration Project. This project is currently in the 30-percent design phase. More information about the Dry Creek projects will be included in the next issue of the Biological Opinion News and can be found at www.sonomacountywater.org/rrifr.

Over the course of the 2010 trapping season, 4,876 steelhead juveniles and smolts as well as 102 coho smolts were monitored in Austin Creek.



In addition, 63 steelhead juveniles and smolts and 224 coho salmon smolts were monitored in Dutch Bill Creek.



For more information on the Water Agency's fisheries monitoring program, visit www.sonomacountywater.org/fisheries.