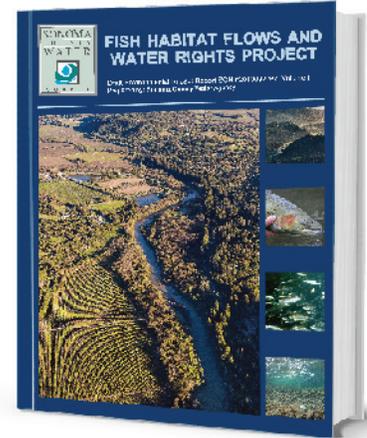


# Fish Habitat Flows and Water Rights Draft Environmental Impact Report

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

On August 19, 2016, the Water Agency released the Fish Habitat Flows and Water Rights Project (Fish Flow Project) Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for public review. The Fish Flow Project DEIR describes the proposed project, the purpose of the project, why it is necessary and the potential environmental impacts of the project. This document provides short replies to frequently asked questions. For more details, please refer to the Fish Flow Project DEIR, which can be found at [www.sonomacountywater.org/fish-flow](http://www.sonomacountywater.org/fish-flow).



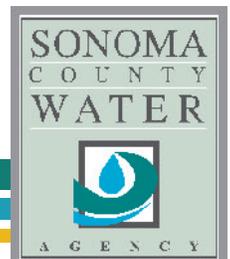
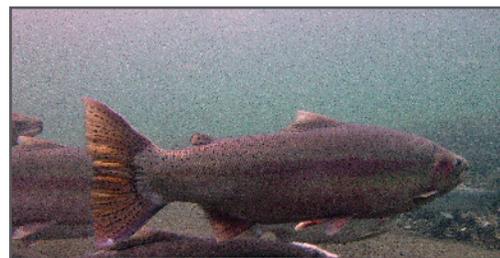
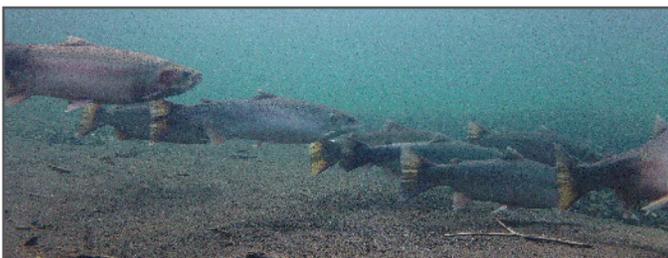
**What is the Fish Flow Project?** A federal agency (National Marine Fisheries Service) determined in its 2008 Russian River Biological Opinion that by lowering the minimum amount and reducing the velocity of stream flows, the Water Agency can create better habitat for endangered fish. Summertime flows in the Russian River and Dry Creek can be too high for two fish species that are on the endangered species list: coho salmon and steelhead. When these fish are young, the velocity of the water makes it difficult for them to thrive.

In order to avoid jeopardizing these species, comply with the Endangered Species Act, and continue to operate our system of supplying water to 600,000 people, the Water Agency must ask the state (the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board)) to modify our existing water right permits in order to comply with this federal determination.

A state agency (California Department of Fish and Wildlife) agreed with the federal government (it issued a Consistency Determination on the Russian River Biological Opinion) as coho salmon are also listed as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act.

Starting in 2010, the Water Agency was required by the Russian River Biological Opinion to request temporary changes to minimum instream flow requirements on the Russian River during the summer months to improve conditions for young salmon. Once the State Water Board approves the proposed changes in the Fish Flow Project, the Water Agency will no longer have to ask for changes on an annual basis.

The Fish Flow Project proposes changes to the Water Agency's water rights permits as described below.



## What is the purpose of the Fish Flow Project?

The Fish Flow Project has five purposes:

1. **Comply with National Marine Fisheries Service's Russian River Biological Opinion**, which requires the Water Agency to ask the State Water Board to lower minimum instream flow requirements in the Russian River and Dry Creek in order to improve conditions for coho and steelhead.
2. **Improve conditions for threatened Chinook salmon**, by better preserving cold water in Lake Mendocino, which can be released for the fall Chinook migration. Make changes to the Water Agency's current water right permits that will help the Water Agency operate its system more efficiently.
3. **Replace a measuring requirement** in the Water Agency's water right permits, called the "hydrologic index," to better reflect conditions in the Russian River watershed.
4. **Extend to 2040 the Water Agency's right to divert and re-divert 75,000 acre feet of water** annually, in order to ensure a reliable water supply for more than 600,000 people.
5. **Add existing points of diversion for Occidental Community Service District and the Town of Windsor as authorized points of diversion** in the Water Agency's water right permits. (The Water Agency has agreements with specific entities, including Occidental and Windsor, that authorize them to divert water from the Russian River under the Water Agency's water right permits using their own facilities. The proposed change would allow these entities to report water diverted through these existing points of diversion under the Water Agency's water right permits, and would not increase the total amount of diversions.)

**Why is the Fish Flow Project important?** Coho and Chinook salmon and steelhead were once abundant in the Russian River watershed. Today, coho are on the brink of extinction (and are listed as endangered on state and federal endangered species lists) and Chinook and steelhead are listed as threatened in the Russian River watershed. These anadromous fish are hatched in the river, and in the streams and creeks that are tributaries of the Russian River. Coho and steelhead spend much of their lives in the Russian River before they head to the Pacific Ocean (Chinook head out to sea as juveniles). All three species return to the river or its tributaries to spawn.

The Russian River Biological Opinion found that operations of the Water Agency and the US Army Corps of Engineers have the potential to damage habitat for juvenile coho and steelhead.

The Fish Flow Project keeps the Water Agency in compliance with the Russian River Biological Opinion. Complying with this federal mandate is critical to maintaining the water supply for 600,000 people and helping to restore coho and steelhead to the watershed.

## What is the timeline for the Fish Flow Project?

**July 19, 2016** – Water Agency staff went to its Board of Directors to authorize release of the Fish Flow Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR), establish the public comment period, and set a public hearing on the DEIR.

**August 19, 2016** – The DEIR released; public comment period begins

**August 22, 2016** – Public workshop, Cloverdale Veterans Hall, 205 West 1st Street, 4-8 p.m.\*

**August 24, 2016** – Public workshop, Monte Rio Community Center, 20488 Highway 116, 4-8 p.m.\*

**September 13, 2016** – Public Hearing, Sonoma County Board of Supervisors Chambers, 575 Administration Drive, Santa Rosa, no earlier than 3 p.m.

**October 17, 2016** – Public comment period closes, 5 p.m.



\*The two open houses provide an opportunity for people to learn from staff about the project and the DEIR. No verbal public comments will be recorded during the public workshops, although comment cards will be available for people to provide written comments.

The public will have 60 days to comment on the DEIR. The Water Agency will respond to these comments in the final EIR (estimated completion of fall/winter 2016, but timing could vary depending on the extent of comments).

After the EIR has been completed and certified by the Water Agency's Board of Directors, the State Water Board will consider the project. In the meantime, the Biological Opinion requires the Water Agency to annually ask the State Water Board to temporarily reduce flows.

**Why does the Fish Flow Project propose to move the hydrologic index to the Russian River Watershed?** Currently, minimum instream flows are set depending on hydrologic conditions as measured at Lake Pillsbury, which is part of PG&E's Potter Valley Project. Lake Pillsbury is located in Lake County in Eel River Watershed. Since 2006, there has been a 60 percent reduction in the amount of water annually diverted from the Eel River via the Potter Valley Project into the Russian River Watershed. The Fish Flow Project proposes changing the hydrologic index to the Russian River Watershed to more accurately reflect conditions in Lake Mendocino and the Russian River.

**Why does the Fish Flow Project propose to change the naming system of hydrologic conditions?** Currently, minimum instream flows are set depending on whether hydrologic conditions as measured at Lake Pillsbury are "normal," "dry" or "critical." While this three-step schedule is easy to understand, it may not accurately depict watershed conditions, nor does it allow the Water Agency to quickly adjust to changing scenarios.

The proposed naming system is a one through five index (a practice commonly used in other watersheds). Schedule 1 refers to the wettest conditions; Schedule 5 is the driest. Adding two more steps in the schedule will allow for more responsive management of water storage. This is particularly true for Lake Mendocino during the summer and fall months when it's important to preserve cold water for later releases to benefit rearing steelhead and the fall-run Chinook salmon migration. The proposed five schedules will allow for additional, smaller reductions in minimum instream flows, particularly in the Upper Russian River – benefiting fish and habitat.

**What are the flows proposed in the project?** After extensive modeling by Water Agency staff and consultants, and consultation with National Marine Fisheries Service and California Department of Fish & Wildlife, the Fish Flow Project proposes a five-step schedule, based on hydrologic conditions (explained above). The five-step schedule, with Schedule 1 being the wettest years and Schedule 5, the driest, results in five different schedules of flows.

- **In the upper river (above the confluence of Dry Creek and the river):** For the wettest years (Schedule 1), minimum proposed flows would be 105 cubic feet per second (cfs) year round. In the driest years (Schedule 5), minimum instream flows are proposed to be 25 cfs.
- **In the lower river (below the confluence of Dry Creek and the river):** For the wettest years (Schedule 1), minimum proposed flows would be 135 cfs October 16 through April and 70 cfs from May through October 15. In the driest years (Schedule 5), minimum instream flows are proposed to be 35 cfs year round.
- **In Dry Creek:** For the wettest years (Schedule 1), minimum proposed flows would be 75 cfs January through April, 50 cfs May through October 15 and between October 16 and December 31, 105 cfs. In the driest years (Schedule 5), minimum instream flows are proposed to be 75 cfs October 16 through March and between April and October 15, 50 cfs.



Modeling finds that 68 percent of the time, Schedule 1 would likely be used. In only 1 percent of the time -- during a multi-year drought -- would Schedule 5 likely be used. Of the remaining years, Schedule 2 would likely be used 20 percent of the time; Schedule 3, 6 percent; and Schedule 4, 4 percent.

**Actual flows.** While the Water Agency is requesting that the State Water Board lower minimum instream flow requirements, flows will likely be above the minimums because Water Agency operators manage flows with a buffer to account for water loss along the river and in Dry Creek. In Dry Creek, habitat enhancements that are completed, underway or planned for future construction should allow for flows to regularly be above the minimum. Dry Creek habitat enhancements are separate projects that were the subject of a separate environmental impact analysis.

**Why are the proposed Fish Flow Project minimum flows different than the recommended Biological Opinion minimum flows?** The proposed Fish Flow Project balances the creation of habitat for young coho and steelhead; preserving water in Lake Mendocino for the fall Chinook migration; meeting water supply needs; and improving the reliability of Lake Mendocino. The proposed flows result from studies completed since the Biological Opinion was issued. The Biological Opinion contemplated that studies might result in different flow recommendations.

**Other elements of the Fish Flow Project.** In addition to changing minimum instream flows as required by the Biological Opinion, and revising the hydrologic index, the Water Agency is proposing that the State Water Board make other changes to update the Water Agency's water right permits, including extending the deadlines for completing beneficial use of the water right permits to December 31, 2040; and adding the existing Occidental Community Services District and Town of Windsor points of diversion and re-diversion to the authorized points of diversion in these permits.

**How does the DEIR take into consideration other requirements of the Biological Opinion?**

In addition to the changes in minimum flows, the Biological Opinion requires the Water Agency and US Army Corps of Engineers to enhance six miles of habitat in Dry Creek and to manage the Russian River estuary during the summer to maintain a closed lagoon. Both of these projects are underway, and the impacts were analyzed in separate certified EIRs. The Fish Flow DEIR considers these projects in the Cumulative Impact section of the document (Chapter 5).

**How does this project affect growth?** In the Fish Flow Project, the Water Agency isn't asking to increase the amount of water that it has rights to divert from the river and reservoirs -- it will still be limited to a maximum of 75,000 acre feet of water annually. The general plans of cities and counties determine where and when new housing is built.

**How will lower flows affect water quality?** Chapter 4.2 of the DEIR analyzes the potential impacts of the project on water quality. Under the proposed project, salmon and steelhead in the Russian River would benefit from colder water with more dissolved oxygen during summer months. There is no simple answer in regard to algae production, which is a complicated process that involves nutrients, sunlight, and temperatures. Several years of data show no consistent trends related to algae and instream flows. Conditions that may contribute to algal production in the river exist under current conditions and it is anticipated that this will continue to be the case under the proposed project.

**How will this project affect recreation?** Chapter 4.5 of the DEIR analyzes the potential impacts of the project on recreation at lakes Mendocino and Sonoma and in the Russian River.

At Lake Mendocino, the analysis finds that under the proposed project, the South Boat Ramp would be closed due to low water levels less amount of time. The Proposed project would result in more water in



the lake, but could also result in less parking at the North Boat Ramp and lack of access to Bushay and Kyen campgrounds because of high water levels during the recreation season.

At Lake Sonoma, which is a much larger reservoir with long boat ramps and campgrounds located in areas that are outside the water supply pool, there are minimal potential impacts to recreation during the recreational season.

In the Russian River, the proposed project is not expected to significantly change stream depths to the point that swimming and sunbathing are impacted. This is in part because seasonal dams (Healdsburg Memorial Beach dam, Mirabel inflatable dam, Johnson's Beach dam, and Vacation Beach dam) downstream of pools control the depth of the pools when there is summer base flow in the Russian River.

A 2009 study found that stream flows in the Russian River of 70 cfs or above provide adequate flow for boaters. When including the operational buffer, Schedule 1 through Schedule 3 would have flows above 70 cfs in the Russian River and would be sufficient for boating. Without the buffer, flows in the upper river during Schedule 3 could drop to 65 cfs, making boating challenging.

Schedule 4 and 5 would have flows below 70 cfs even with the operational buffer. Schedule 4 occurs five to six percent of the time in the 104 year period of record (1906-2010). Schedule 5 occurs 1 percent of the time in the 104 year period of record.

**Does the DEIR consider the closure of PG&E's Potter Valley Project?** The Fish Flow Project assumes continuation of the Potter Valley Project but a "No Potter Valley Project" scenario is analyzed in the cumulative impact section (Chapter 5).

**Where can I learn more about this project?** You can find the DEIR by going to [www.sonomacountywater.org/fish-flow](http://www.sonomacountywater.org/fish-flow) or at Sonoma and Mendocino County libraries.

Public informational open houses will be held on:

**August 22, 4-8 p.m.,** Cloverdale Veterans Hall  
205 West 1st Street

**August 24, 4-8 p.m.,** Monte Rio Community Center  
20488 Highway 116

A public hearing will be held before the Water Agency's Board of Directors on **September 13, 2016**, at 3 p.m. at the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors Chambers in Santa Rosa.

#### **How can I share my concerns or support?**

- You can provide written comments to the Water Agency. The 60-day public review period begins on August 19. All comments are due by 5 p.m., October 17. Written comments can be sent to [fishflow-eir@scwa.ca.gov](mailto:fishflow-eir@scwa.ca.gov) or to:  
Sonoma County Water Agency  
Attn: Fish Flow DEIR  
404 Aviation Boulevard, Santa Rosa, CA 95403
- You can provide verbal comments by attending a public hearing on Tuesday, September 13 at the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors Chambers, 575 Administration Drive, Room 100 A, Santa Rosa.
- Please go to [www.sonomacountywater.org/fish-flow](http://www.sonomacountywater.org/fish-flow) for more information.



## **ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW PROCESS**

**Purpose:** The purpose of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) is to disclose the possible impacts the project could have on the environment and people, including water quality, natural resources, habitat, recreation and the economy.

**Why is it important to the public?** The DEIR lays out the possible impacts of permanently changing minimum flows in the river. The DEIR considers impacts to drinking water supplies, to people who canoe, kayak and swim in the river, and to plants and animals that depend on the river for habitat. The 60-day comment period and the September 13, 2016 public hearing are important opportunities for people and agencies to share their input.

**Timing:** The public comment period, the response to comments and the certification of the Final EIR will take several months. It could take a year or more for the State Water Board to consider the flow changes and to hold a public hearing.

**State CEQA document:** Because minimum flow levels in the Russian River and Dry Creek are controlled by the State Water Board, the Water Agency is preparing an EIR under the California Environmental Quality Act. While the Water Agency doesn't anticipate using this document for federal purposes, if necessary at some point in the future, the Water Agency can comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) using the information from the EIR.

**Baseline:** In order to analyze the impacts of the project, the DEIR compares proposed conditions with baseline conditions. Baseline conditions are average Russian River flows from 2006-2013. (In 2006, PG&E began implementing a 2004 license amendment for its Potter Valley Project, as required by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. This new diversion schedule permanently reduced diversions from the Eel River watershed into Potter Valley and Lake Mendocino by an annual average of about 60 percent).

Baseline conditions for water supply demands are 2009-2014. The baseline demand time period reflects the time when statewide conservation legislation became effective (SBX 7X requires water suppliers to increase conservation by 20% by 2020).

**Deadline for comments:** The deadline to submit comments on the DEIR is 5 p.m. October 17, 2016.

### **TO LEARN MORE**

**Website:** The DEIR, the NOP, the Biological Opinion, FAQ sheets and information from past meetings and forums are available online at [www.sonomacountywater.org/rrifr](http://www.sonomacountywater.org/rrifr).

