



NOTICE OF PREPARATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

To: State Clearinghouse,
Responsible and Trustee Agencies,
Property Owners and Interested Parties

From: Sonoma County Water Agency
404 Aviation Blvd.
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

Subject: Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Russian River Estuary Management Project (Estuary Project)

The Sonoma County Water Agency (Agency) is preparing an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the proposed Russian River Estuary Management Project (Estuary Project), in accordance with the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the State CEQA Guidelines, and the Agency's Procedures for the Implementation of CEQA. The Agency will act as the Lead Agency pursuant to CEQA, and will consider all comments received in response to this Notice of Preparation (NOP), including comments from responsible and trustee agencies, property owners, and interested parties regarding the scope and content of the information to be included in the EIR. This NOP describes the proposed project that will be analyzed in the EIR and identifies the issue areas that will be studied during the environmental review. Agencies and interested members of the public are invited to provide input on the scope of the environmental analysis and alternatives to be evaluated.

Background

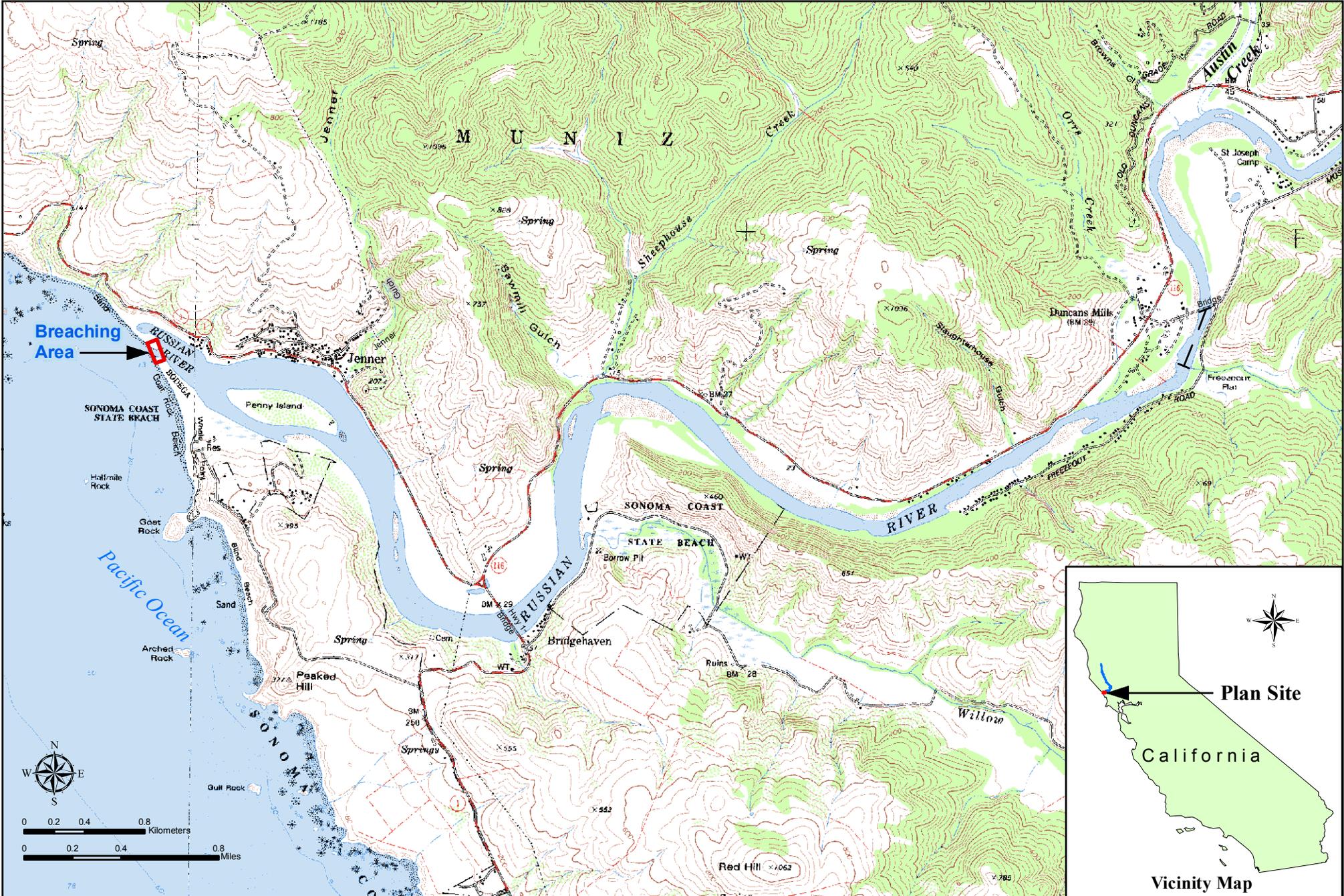
The Agency was created in 1949 by the California Legislature as a special district to provide flood protection and water supply services. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors acts as the Agency's Board of Directors. The Agency's powers and duties, as authorized by the California Legislature, include the production and supply of surface water and groundwater for beneficial uses, control of flood waters, generation of electricity, providing recreational facilities (in connection with the Agency's facilities), and the treatment and disposal of wastewater.

The Russian River Estuary is located approximately 60 miles (97 kilometers) northwest of San Francisco Bay, near the town of Jenner, Sonoma County, California (**Figure 1**). The Estuary extends from the mouth of the Russian River upstream approximately 6 miles (10 kilometers) to an area between Austin Creek and the community of Duncans Mills. The mouth of the Estuary and the Russian River is located at Goat Rock State Beach, which is owned by California State Parks.

The Estuary is open to the ocean tides for much of the year. At certain times, the formation of a barrier beach across the mouth of the Russian River cuts off the tidal connection between the ocean and the Russian River and creates a lagoon. The Estuary may close at any time of the year, although the closures occur most often during the spring, summer, and late fall. Closures result in increasing water levels in the Estuary behind the barrier beach and flooding of low-lying properties may occur. Natural breaching of the barrier beach occurs when Estuary surface levels exceed the height of the barrier beach and overtop it, creating an outlet channel that reconnects the Russian River to the Pacific Ocean. Historically, private citizens breached the barrier beach, enabling the river to flow into the ocean, in an effort to avoid flooding. The Sonoma County Public Works Department accepted responsibility for breaching in the 1950s, using heavy equipment to breach. In the mid-1990s, mechanically breaching the barrier beach became the Agency's responsibility.

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) issued the *Biological Opinion for Water Supply, Flood Control Operations, and Channel Maintenance conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Sonoma County Water Agency, and the Mendocino County Russian River Flood Control and Water Conservation District in the Russian River Watershed* (Russian River BO) on September 24, 2008.¹ NMFS' Russian River BO is a

¹ NMFS' Russian River BO may be accessed online at www.sonomacountywater.org and may be reviewed at SCWA's office at 404 Aviation Boulevard, Santa Rosa, CA.



culmination of more than a decade of consultation between the Agency, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), and the NMFS regarding the impact of the Agency's and Corps' water supply and flood control activities on three fish species listed under the federal Endangered Species Act: Central California Coast steelhead, Central California Coast coho salmon, and California Coastal Chinook salmon. The California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) issued a consistency determination on November 9, 2009, finding that the Russian River BO was consistent with the requirements of the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) and adopted the measures identified in the BO.

NMFS concluded in the Russian River BO that the continued operations of Coyote Valley Dam and Warm Springs Dam by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and SCWA in a manner similar to recent historic practices, together with the Agency's stream channel maintenance activities and estuary management, are likely to jeopardize and adversely modify critical habitat for endangered coho salmon and threatened steelhead.

NMFS' Russian River BO found that artificially elevated inflows to the Russian River Estuary during the low flow season (May through October) and historic artificial breaching practices have significant, adverse effects on the Russian River's estuarine rearing habitat for juvenile salmonids, particularly steelhead. The historic method of artificial breaching, which is done in response to rising water levels behind the barrier beach², adversely affects the Estuary's water quality and depths by creating a tidal marine environment with shallow depths and high salinity. NMFS' Russian River BO concludes that the combination of high inflows and breaching practices impact rearing habitat because they interfere with natural processes that would otherwise cause a freshwater lagoon to form behind the barrier beach. According to NMFS, fresh or brackish water lagoons at the mouths of many streams in central and southern California often provide depths and water quality that are highly favorable to the survival of rearing salmon and steelhead.³

The Russian River BO requires the Agency to collaborate with NMFS and CDFG and to modify Estuary management in order to reduce marine influence (high salinity and tidal inflow) and promote a higher water level in the Estuary (formation of a fresh or brackish water lagoon⁴) from May 15 to October 15 (referred to hereafter as the "lagoon management period"). Conditions in a fresh or brackish water lagoon are thought to enhance the quality of rearing habitat for juvenile salmonids, particularly steelhead. A program of potential, incremental steps are prescribed to accomplish this, including adaptive management of a lagoon outlet channel on the barrier beach during the lagoon management period. The Agency would continue the historical practice of artificially breaching the barrier beach to prevent flooding outside of the lagoon management period.

Existing Estuary Management Practices

The Agency mechanically breaches the barrier beach when the water level in the Estuary is between 4.5 and 7 feet, as determined by the gauge at the Jenner Visitor's Center, in accordance with the *Russian River Estuary Study 1992–1993*, which specifies breaching the barrier beach when the Estuary water surface level is between 4.5 and 7.0 feet to prevent flooding of low-lying properties. Breaching occurred every year between 1996 and 2009, except 2006. Monthly breaching activities varied year to year; the majority of the breaching events occurred in the fall (October and November), spring (April, May and June) and the month of September. The lowest number of breaching events occurred in 2004 (1 event) and the highest number (13 attempted events with 11 successful breachings) occurred in 2009. Mechanical breaching typically consists of the following actions:

- 24 hours prior to breaching, the Agency contacts State Parks lifeguards and posts signs and barriers to minimize potential hazards to beach visitors.
- A bulldozer or similar equipment is offloaded at the parking lot at Goat Rock State Beach and driven onto the beach via an existing access point.

² For the purposes of this project, the term barrier beach is used to describe closed sandbar conditions, consistent with NMFS terminology.

³ National Marine Fisheries Service. Biological Opinion for Water Supply, Flood Control Operations, and Channel Maintenance conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Sonoma County Water Agency, and the Mendocino County Russian River Flood Control and Water Conservation District in the Russian River Watershed. p. 243. September 2008.

⁴ A lagoon is formed when a barrier beach restricts tidal exchange in the Estuary.

- A “pilot channel” is cut at a depth below the lagoon water level that will allow river flows to carry sand into the ocean once the last portion of the barrier beach is removed. The size of the pilot channel varies, depending on the height of the barrier beach, the water level of the tide, and the water level in the estuary. A typical channel is approximately 100 feet long, 25 feet wide, and 6 feet deep. The amount of sand that is moved ranges from less than 100 cubic yards to approximately 1,000 cubic yards. The sand is placed onto the beach adjacent to the pilot channel.
- After the pilot channel is dug, the last upstream portion of the barrier beach is removed, allowing river water to flow into the ocean. The rapid outflow of river water carries sand into the ocean, which typically enlarges the pilot channel to between 50-and 100 feet in width within a day after breaching.

The channel is monitored and equipment is driven back to the existing access point and loaded for transport. Signage and barriers are removed, and the channel is periodically monitored by Agency staff.

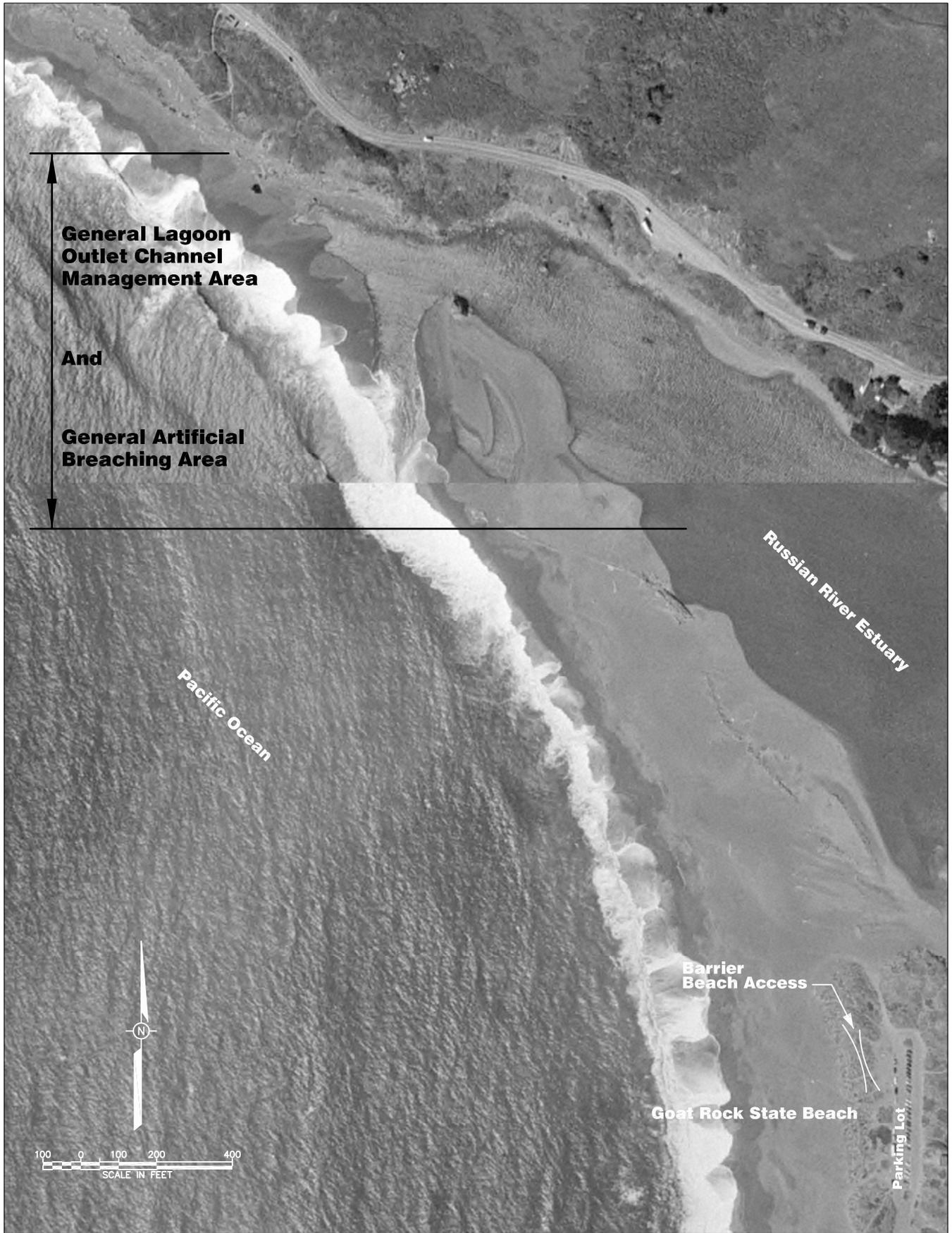
Proposed Russian River Estuary Management Project

In order to comply with the requirements of the NMFS’ Russian River BO, the Agency will implement adaptive management of the Estuary with the dual objectives of enhancing rearing habitat for juvenile salmonids, particularly steelhead, and managing estuary water levels to minimize flood hazard. Rearing habitat may be enhanced by reducing tidal influence on the Russian River Estuary from May 15 to October 15 to increase freshwater habitat available for rearing salmon and steelhead. The Russian River Estuary Management Project proposes the following elements:

Continued Artificial Breaching. The Agency will continue the historical practice of artificially breaching the barrier beach outside the lagoon management period (May 15 to October 15), as allowed in the NMFS’ Russian River BO and described in the *Russian River Estuary Study 1992–1993*, to minimize potential flooding of low-lying properties along the Russian River. Artificial breaching outside of the lagoon management period will be implemented consistent with current practices, as previously described.

Lagoon Adaptive Management and Lagoon Outlet Channel. To comply with conditions stipulated in the NMFS’ Russian River BO, the Agency will pursue an alternative approach for management of estuarine water levels in the Estuary during the lagoon management period (May 15 to October 15), and will adaptively manage a lagoon outlet channel with the intent of achieving an average daily water surface elevation of at least 7 feet. Adaptive management requires active monitoring of biological productivity, water quality, and physical processes in the Estuary, and refinement of management actions to achieve desired water levels to support biological productivity, while simultaneously providing flood control for properties adjacent to the Estuary.

To create and maintain a shallow, “perched” lagoon with water levels between 4 and 9 feet, the Agency will excavate an outlet channel with a bed elevation low enough to allow outflow from the lagoon to pass over the barrier beach, but high enough to minimize the potential for closure caused by ocean waves. The outlet channel bed slope would be minimized to reduce the potential for unintentional breaching of the barrier beach. The channel would be located within the area that it has been observed to naturally occur, between the jetty and approximately 1,500 feet to the northwest (**Figure 2**). Channel length would vary based upon location, but would establish a slope gradient to provide for overflow while minimizing channel erosion. Various channel locations may be pursued in an effort to adapt other project variables, such as bed slope, bed elevation and channel width, and to take advantage of site features such as areas of reduced wave energy. Physical establishment of the outlet channel during the lagoon management period would be similar in terms of equipment and duration as artificial breaching. Project implementation would increase the duration of freshwater lagoon conditions during the lagoon management period (May 15 to October 15) to increase freshwater habitat available for rearing salmon and steelhead. In the event that the outlet channel erodes the barrier beach to re-establish a tidal inlet, the Agency would resume adaptive management of the outlet channel’s width, slope, and alignment in consultation with the NMFS and CDFG after ocean wave action naturally reforms the barrier beach and closes the river’s mouth.



Purpose: Russian River Estuary Management Project
Datum: 1929 MSL

SONOMA COUNTY WATER AGENCY
404 Aviation Boulevard
Santa Rosa, CA. 95403

In: Russian River
At: Jenner
County Of: Sonoma, CA.
Application By: SCWA

Figure 2

Issues to Be Addressed in the EIR

In accordance with CEQA, the Estuary Project EIR will address the potential environmental impacts associated with the Project. Specific areas of analysis may include: Aesthetics, Agricultural Resources, Air Quality, Biological/ Fisheries Resources, Cultural Resources, Geology and Soils, Hazards and Hazardous Materials, Hydrology and Water Quality, Land Use, Mineral Resources, Noise, Public Services, Recreation, Energy, and Utilities, Aesthetics, and Recreation. Where feasible, mitigation measures will be proposed to avoid or reduce significant impacts. Additionally, potential cumulative impacts of the Estuary Project will be addressed in the EIR. Alternatives analysis will review the No Project Alternative and Estuary management alternatives identified in NMFS' Russian River Biological BO, including jetty modification and alternative flood mitigation strategies. The EIR analysis will consider input and comments received during the NOP review period. Decision-makers, responsible and trustee agencies under CEQA, property owners, and interested persons and parties will also have an opportunity to comment on the Draft EIR after it is published and circulated for public review.

Public Comment Period for this Notice of Preparation

Due to the time limits mandated by State law, responses must be sent at the earliest possible date, but not later than 45 days after receipt of this notice. The public comment period will close at 5:00 p.m. on June 21, 2010. Please include a name, address, and telephone number of a contact person in your agency for all future correspondence on this subject. Please send comments to:

Sonoma County Water Agency
 Attn: Jessica Martini-Lamb, Principal Environmental Specialist
 404 Aviation Boulevard
 Santa Rosa, CA 95403
 Comments may also be submitted electronically via email, estuaryproject@esassoc.com

Scoping Meeting

In order for the public and regulatory agencies to have an opportunity to ask questions and submit comments on the scope of the Estuary Project EIR, two scoping meetings will be held during the NOP review period. Comment forms will be supplied for those who wish to submit written comments at the scoping meeting and verbal comments will be recorded. Written comments may also be submitted anytime during the NOP review period, which closes on June 21, 2010. The scoping meetings will be held:

Wednesday May 19, 2010

Community Meeting, Summary of 2010 Estuary Activities:
 6:30 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.
 Open House Scoping Meeting: 7:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

**Jenner Community Center,
 10398 Highway 1 Jenner CA 95450**

Thursday May 20, 2010

6:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.
 Sonoma County Permit and Resource
 Management Department Meeting Room
**2550 Ventura Avenue
 Santa Rosa, CA 95403**

Documents or files related to the Russian River Estuary Management Project are available for review online at www.sonomacountywater.org, or at the Agency's office located at 404 Aviation Boulevard, Santa Rosa, California, 95403. If you have any questions, or if you wish to update information on our mailing list, please contact Jessica Martini-Lamb at (707) 547-1903.