



Proposed Changes to Russian River Flows

Unlike many urban water systems that rely on underground wells or reservoirs, the Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) meets the majority of its customers' needs by collecting Russian River water from pipes buried deep below the riverbed. The water is naturally filtered through rocks, gravel, and sand and then collected and treated with a minimal amount of chlorine (as required by state law) before it is delivered to customers.

In the summer this innovative and relatively inexpensive collection system relies on water released from Lake Sonoma and Lake Mendocino, which are owned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and operated to meet SCWA water supply needs.

The Problem

A 1986 ruling (referred to as Decision 1610) by the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) requires minimum summertime flows at specified areas of the Russian River and Dry Creek. These minimum flow requirements were set to meet recreation needs and what were understood at the time to be the needs of the fishery. The minimum flow levels vary, depending on whether the year is "normal," "dry," or "critical." For example, at Hacienda Bridge in Guerneville, in normal years the average flow must be 125 cubic feet per second (cfs); in dry years the average flow must be 85 cfs.

Biologists with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) have concluded that current flow levels in the Russian River and Dry Creek during the summer are too high for young coho salmon and steelhead.

The Solution

NMFS biologists believe that reducing summertime flows in the Russian River and Dry Creek would provide better fishery habitat by reducing velocity, minimize the need to artificially breach the sandbar at the river mouth, and may improve estuary conditions for steelhead by allowing the formation of a freshwater lagoon. The NMFS has issued a biological opinion that requires SCWA to ask the State Water Board for permission to reduce summertime flows to 70 cfs (with an operating margin that would allow actual flow to be closer to 85 cfs) at Hacienda Bridge in both normal and dry years.

Reducing summertime flows in the upper Russian River from Lake Mendocino would also retain more of the cold-water pool behind Coyote Valley Dam so that it is available for release in the late summer and the early fall—benefiting adult fish returning to the river to spawn. The biological opinion requires SCWA to ask the State Water Board to reduce summertime flows in the upper river to 125 cfs (current flows range from 185 to 150 cfs).

The Implementation

In September 2009, SCWA submitted a petition to the State Water Board asking for changes to Decision 1610. The proposed changes will require a comprehensive environmental impact report (EIR), which will take several years to complete. The EIR will include analyses of how the proposed changes will affect to recreation, wildlife habitat, water quality, and other aspects of the environment. The process will include multiple opportunities for public comment.

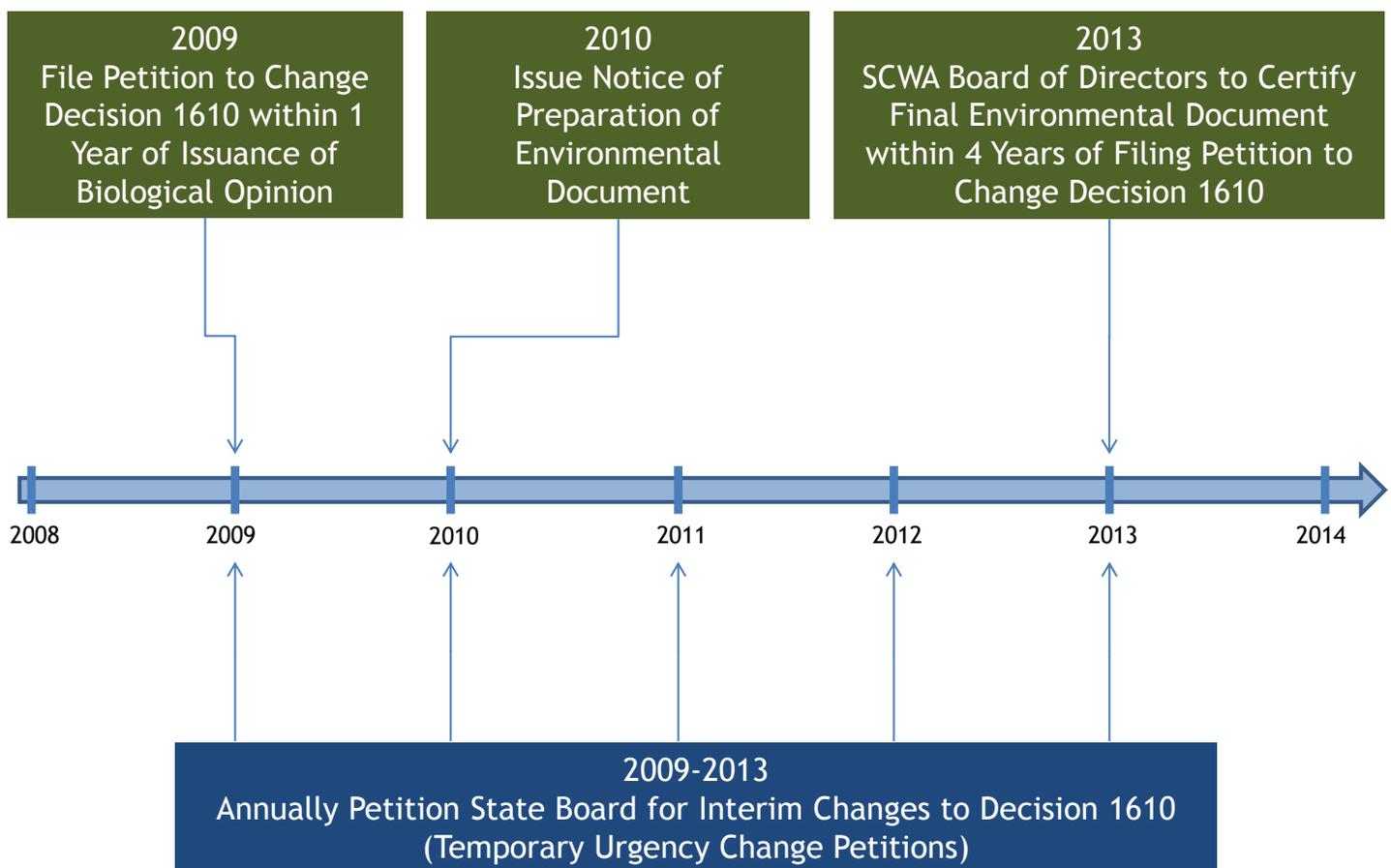
The State Water Board will weigh the information provided in the EIR along with public input when making the ultimate decision about summertime flows. In addition, because the biological opinion requires lower flows beginning in 2010, SCWA must annually ask the State Board for interim changes to Decision 1610.

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The Biological Opinion requires the Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) to petition the State Water Resources Control Board (State Board) to change Decision 1610 – the ruling which established minimum flows in the Russian River during the summer. Because this process will take several years, the Biological Opinion also requires SCWA to annually ask the State Board for interim changes to D1610. This two-pronged process is shown in the flow chart, below.

Permanent Changes to River Flows



Annual Interim Changes to River Flows