



Press Release

For Immediate Release
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Agency to Begin Process for Amending Water Rights, Russian River Flow

Stakeholder group to be formed to ensure public involvement

Santa Rosa, CA – The Sonoma County Water Agency (Agency) Board of Directors on May 15 authorized (on a 4-1 vote) the Agency to begin the process of requesting long-term amendments to the instream flow requirements for the main stem Russian River and Dry Creek in the Agency’s water right permits from the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB), which is specified in SWRCB’s Decision 1610 (D1610). The Board impressed upon the importance of developing a stakeholders group to advise the Agency throughout the amendment process.

The Board authorized the Agency to initiate the process to ask the SWRCB to amend D1610, including:

- Presenting to the SWRCB an overview of the proposed components of an EIR/EIS for amendments to D1610 instream flow requirements and asking for comments from the SWRCB;
- Initiating a facilitated stakeholder group process and returning to the Board with a scope of work for a facilitator;
- Developing scopes of work for feasibility studies for D1610 amendment alternatives.

These amendments are needed as a result of recent changes in operations of PG&E’s Potter Valley Project and possible changes in instream flow management that may result from the Agency’s ongoing Section 7 consultation under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). The need for these amendments has been highlighted by the low Lake Mendocino storage levels in 2002, 2004, and 2007.

Agency staff will begin conducting engineering feasibility studies for alternatives that could be considered in an Environmental Impact Report (EIR)/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), respectively, for amending D1610. Alternatives could include a geomorphologic re-configuring of Dry Creek (to improve fish habitat, reduce bank erosion, and allow for water supply releases), a pipeline to divert water supply releases from Lake Sonoma around Dry Creek, and expansion of the conservation fish hatchery at Warm Springs Dam, as well as other alternatives and measures that may be identified. The completion of these feasibility studies would allow for development of a project description for the new EIR/EIS.

Agency staff will start the process of initiating meetings of a stakeholder workgroup that would be independently facilitated. The Agency Board of Directors will review the membership list of the stakeholders group to ensure all public sectors are involved during the amendment process. The process of conducting feasibility studies and working toward long-term changes to instream flow requirements will have effects throughout the Russian River watershed, and it is important to include stakeholders in the process from the beginning, to make sure all issues are identified and addressed.

The SWRCB will likely require a completed EIR/EIS for the actions before it will begin the process of reconsidering the D1610 flow requirements. Agency staff will coordinate with SWRCB staff throughout the feasibility studies and EIR/EIS process, and present the proposed components of an EIR/EIS to the SWRCB this summer in order to get their input.

Once the stakeholder group process has begun and the SWRCB has given their input on the content of an EIR/EIS, Agency staff will return to the Agency Board with an update on the process, including the proposed components of a Notice of Preparation (NOP) for the EIR/EIS.

It is anticipated that the NOP would be released late this summer, with scoping sessions to follow. The feasibility studies also would begin this summer, and would likely take one to two years to complete, after which time the Draft EIR/EIS preparation could be completed.

“It has become apparent in recent years that the Russian River minimum instream flow requirements may no longer be appropriate,” said Pam Jeane, deputy chief engineer of operations. “D1610 was decided before the listing of three salmonid species under the federal Endangered Species Act, and did not specifically address the importance of fall storage in Lake Mendocino to the Chinook salmon migration.”

Moreover, although D1610 assumed that greater flows were always better for fishery resources, information developed during the Agency’s Russian River ESA Section 7 consultation indicates this may not be so, at least for the salmonid species. As a result, the Agency often cannot release as much water from Lake Sonoma during the summer as was stated in D1610.

“D1610 expressly stated that later fishery studies might give rise to a need to change the minimum flows established by D1610,” said Jeane. “D1610 also expressly stated that flow changes might be needed in the event of a change in flows from PG&E’s Potter Valley Project, which has now occurred.”

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Sonoma County Water Agency provides water supply, flood protection and sanitation services for portions of Sonoma and Marin counties. Visit us at www.sonomacountywater.org.
