



Press Release

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Urgent Changes in Russian River Flows Sought to Protect Threatened Chinook Salmon

Fishery protection measures would include increased water conservation efforts, a series of public meetings on long-term Russian River flow changes

Santa Rosa, CA – In response to its projection of dangerously low water supply levels in Lake Mendocino this fall, the Sonoma County Water Agency (Agency) Board of Directors on Tuesday, April 24 will consider approving a resolution authorizing the Agency to file a Petition for Temporary Urgency Change in the Agency’s water right permits with the State Water Resources Control Board (State Board). The request would seek lower minimum flows in the Russian River, along with taking actions to encourage and increase water conservation efforts and developing a proposal for changes to the Decision 1610 flow regime.

Conditions in the current water year are even less favorable than conditions in water years 2004 and 2002, when Lake Mendocino storage levels declined to extremely low levels. Unless some action is taken (and assuming no large late-season storms occur), the Agency predicts that storage in Lake Mendocino will decline to about 14,000 acre-feet at the beginning of the fall Chinook migration, and to 8,000 acre-feet by the end of the fall. This situation is due both to the lack of precipitation during the recent winter storm season, and to unexpectedly lower inflows from the Potter Valley Project, because of PG&E’s new FERC license.

“The Agency is seeking direction from its Board of Directors to take a proactive role in making sure there is enough water in the Russian River when Chinook salmon begin migrating this fall,” said Pam Jeane, deputy chief engineer of operations. “Our goal is to have 30,000 acre-feet of storage in Lake Mendocino at the beginning of the fall Chinook migration season.”

To meet the storage goal, the Agency’s projections indicate that an additional 16,000 acre-feet must be saved from storage releases during the spring and summer. To reach this level of savings, it is imperative that releases from Lake Mendocino that would be made to achieve minimum instream flows pursuant to State Water Resources Control Board (State Board) Decision 1610 be reduced as soon as possible.

“The Agency has discussed these fishery risks with representatives of the National Marine Fisheries Service and the California Department of Fish and Game and expects to receive letters from these agencies supporting a petition to the State Water Resources Control Board to reduce these release requirements,” said Jeane. The Agency also met with staff from the State Board on April 18 to discuss the proposed Petition.

The projected fall storage level in Lake Mendocino would be inadequate to support the fall upstream migration of Chinook salmon, which are listed as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act. If fall storage in Lake Mendocino were to drop to 14,000 acre-feet at the beginning of the Chinook salmon migration, this volume of water would be too low, and the temperature of the water too high, to support the migration and subsequent spawning. As a result,

there is a risk that migrating Chinook salmon in the Russian River could die in the fall unless action is taken now to maintain fall storage in Lake Mendocino.

Currently, the Agency's water right permits require the Agency to release water from Lake Mendocino to meet the 185 cubic feet per second (cfs) instream flow requirement at the confluence of the West Fork and the East Fork of the Russian River, even though the Russian River is still gaining water from accretion flows. As a result of these accretions, flows are about 240 cfs at Hopland, 400 cfs at Healdsburg, and 500 cfs at Guerneville, even though the Agency's water rights permits currently only require minimum flows of 185 cfs at Hopland and Healdsburg, and 125 cfs at Guerneville. The Agency is thus currently required by its existing water right permits to draw down storage from Lake Mendocino for no recreational, fishery, or water supply purpose. Were the Agency able to meet its instream flow requirements at Hopland rather than at the confluence of the East and West Forks, the result would be an additional 3,600 acre-feet of fall storage, even if no other action were taken. Later in the spring and summer, these accretions will decrease and ultimately disappear. Prompt action is thus necessary to accomplish these savings.

In order to meet the target minimum fall storage level of 30,000 acre-feet in Lake Mendocino, additional reductions in the applicable instream-flow requirements are necessary. To reach this fall storage target, the Agency recommends that the Petition ask the State Board to reduce the required instream flows to 75 cfs between the East Fork/West Fork confluence and the Dry Creek, Russian River confluence and to 85 cfs at Guerneville. These reduced minimum flow requirements would provide the Agency with sufficient flexibility to balance releases from both Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma to meet peak water supply demands, while maintaining much of the fishery and recreational benefits that the river provides. If the State Board did not act, minimum flow requirements are projected to be 150 cfs between the East Fork/West Fork confluence the Dry Creek/Russian River confluence and 125 cfs at Guerneville, and Lake Mendocino storage would continue to drop dramatically. The proposed changes would be requested for this year only.

In 2004, the State Board granted the Agency's petition to reduce the minimum instream flow requirements on a temporary basis to those applicable in a "dry" year (75 cfs in the upper Russian River, and 85 cfs at Guerneville). The resulting reduced flows did not result in any significant reduction in recreational values or fisheries during that spring and summer, and allowed for higher Lake Mendocino storage and resulting fisheries protection during the fall. In addition, staff from the Agency and the United States Geological Survey (USGS) conducted extensive water quality testing during the 2004 lower flow conditions. Those tests did not identify any significant impacts to water quality resulting from the reductions in flow. The USGS report presenting these data can be found on the internet at <http://pubs.usgs.gov/ds/ds168/>. Filing the Temporary Urgency Petition would be exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act under State CEQA Guidelines Section 15307 (Actions Taken by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of Natural Resources), Section 15308 (Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment) and Section 15301(i) (Operations of Existing Facilities).

Although reducing required instream flows is critical to conserving fall storage in Lake Mendocino this year, reducing diversions from the Russian River and its tributaries through the implementation of water conservation measures and use of recycled water is also critical to maintaining storage levels. To maximize conservation and recycled water use, the Agency Board will be requested to authorize Agency staff to take the following actions:

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1. Request and encourage all users of water from the Russian River and its tributaries in Mendocino, Sonoma, and Marin Counties – including the Agency's water contractors and their customers, agricultural irrigators, municipal diverters and their customers – to implement water conservation measures to reduce the amount of water diverted from the Russian River and its tributaries.
 2. Implement public outreach and media programs to encourage water conservation by individuals and businesses in the Russian River watershed.
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3. Collaborate with wastewater agencies in the region to maximize recycled water distribution to agricultural irrigators, to decrease diversions by such irrigators from the Russian River and its tributaries.
4. Develop for Board consideration a program to implement water conservation programs for municipalities outside of the Agency's service area that divert water from the Russian River or its tributaries.

Process for Considering Changes in D1610

It has become apparent in recent years that the Russian River and Dry Creek minimum instream flow requirements that were set by the State Board 21 years ago in its Decision 1610 (D1610) may no longer be appropriate. D1610 was adopted prior to the listing of three salmonid species as threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act, and it did not specifically address the importance of fall storage in Lake Mendocino to the Chinook salmon migration. Moreover, although D1610 assumed that greater flows would always be better for fishery resources, information developed during the Agency's Endangered Species Act Section 7 consultation suggests this may not be so, at least for the salmonid species. D1610 expressly contemplated that later fishery studies might give rise to a need to change the flows established by D1610. D1610 also expressly contemplated that flow changes might be needed in the event of a change in flows from PG&E's Potter Valley Project into the Russian River Basin. Accordingly, in D1610, the State Water Board reserved jurisdiction to reconsider minimum streamflows as needed to respond to changed conditions and new information.

Because these D1610-contemplated changes have occurred, Agency staff will recommend that work commence on a proposal to ask the State Board to change D1610 minimum flows to account for these changes. Possible Russian River and Dry Creek flow changes were evaluated as a part of the Agency's Section 7 consultation with NMFS and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The analysis in the Agency's Biological Assessment determined that lower summer flows would improve habitat for the listed salmonid species, and also increase the pool of cool water available in Lake Mendocino to support the fall migration runs. Changing D1610 flows to meet these fishery objectives would aid in the conservation and recovery of the listed salmonid species.

As part of the development of D1610 flow changes, Agency staff will also recommend holding workshops this spring in Ukiah, Healdsburg, and Guerneville on May 1, 2 and 3 to discuss the possible flow changes and the importance of the flow changes to improving summer salmonid habitat and to the preservation of fall Lake Mendocino storage levels. After the workshops, the General Manager/Chief Engineer would likely issue a Notice of Preparation for an Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement, which would evaluate the environmental impacts of the flow changes and of other measures to protect and conserve the listed salmonid species.

"These three suites of actions – promptly filing a Temporary Urgency Change Petition with the State Board, taking actions to encourage and increase water conservation to address the pending situation, and developing a proposal for changes to the D1610 flow regime and implementation of other measures to protect fishery resources – are consistent with the Agency's long-term goal of creating a sustainable, balanced system that can meet the needs of the Agency's water customers, the needs of recreational users of the Russian River and the needs of the listed species," said Jeane.

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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.