



## Press Release

**For Immediate Release**  
**April 24, 2007**

**Contact:**  
**Brad Sherwood 707. 521.6204**

# **Agency Receives Authorization to File Petition for Temporary Urgency Changes in Russian River Flows**

## ***Public hearing set for May 15 to discuss long-term changes to State Water Board Decision 1610***

Santa Rosa, CA – The Sonoma County Water Agency (Agency) Board of Directors on Tuesday, April 24 authorized 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 will seek lower minimum instream flow requirements in the Russian River to conserve water in Lake Mendocino. The Agency was also directed to take actions to encourage and increase water conservation efforts. The Petition will be filed with the State Board by Friday, April 27.

The Agency will hold three public meetings to educate the public about the Petition for Temporary Urgency Change. Agency staff will also share updated Lake Mendocino water supply projections and provide an array of water conservation materials. Below are the dates and times of the public meetings:

May 1 – Ukiah City Hall, 300 Seminary Avenue, Ukiah, CA

May 2 – Healdsburg City Hall, 401 Grove Street, Healdsburg, CA

May 3 – Guerneville Veterans Memorial Hall, First and Church Streets, Guerneville, CA

All three meetings will begin at 7p.m and conclude at 9p.m. For more information about these meetings see the public notice on the Agency's website ([www.sonomacountywater.org](http://www.sonomacountywater.org)).

On May 15 the Agency's Board of Directors will hold a public hearing to discuss the Agency's request to begin the process of making long-term changes to State Board Decision 1610. The agenda will be made available on the Agency's website.

The Agency's Board of Directors also directed the Agency to 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.

"Conservation is tantamount to preservation of water resources for the future. Making the right decisions today will be significant for Sonoma County and the habitat for Chinook salmon," said Agency Board of Director and Chairwoman Valerie Brown.

To increase public awareness about how to conserve water, the Agency Board of Directors also requested that the Agency implement public outreach and media programs to encourage water conservation by individuals, businesses, and the agricultural community.

## **Background:**

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 taking 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 downstream of the Dry Creek confluence. 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 75 cfs between the East Fork/West Fork confluence and the Dry Creek/Russian River confluence starting June 1, and 125 cfs downstream of the Dry Creek confluence, 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).

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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](http://www.sonomacountywater.org).*

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