



Press Release

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Difficulties Arise in Managing Russian River Flows and Meeting State Ordered Conservation Efforts

Agency submits conservation work plan

Santa Rosa, CA— The Sonoma County Water Agency (Agency) today called for a cooperative regional effort and immediate and long-term assistance from the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board), Department of Fish and Game, and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for assistance in managing the Russian River system to meet the current fifteen percent mandatory conservation goal and prevent future regulatory droughts. The call for assistance was delivered through a work plan submitted by the Agency to the State Water Board as required by Term 14 and Term 15 of the State Water Board Order. The complete work plan may be viewed at www.sonomacountywater.org.

“Our Agency is having a difficult time operating the Russian River system due to regulations and diversions outside the Agency’s control and service area,” said Agency Director Tim Smith. “We need everybody to pull together to help manage the system and protect us from future regulatory droughts.”

An array of issues has handicapped the Agency from managing the Russian River system to meet its State Water Board Order requirement for a fifteen percent reduction in Agency Russian River diversions. The Order was intended to reduce releases from Lake Mendocino to preserve water in storage for subsequent fall release to support the migration of Chinook salmon. To date, cities and water districts served by the Agency have not achieved the fifteen percent reduction. One option to help supplement Russian River flows to make up for the reductions in releases from Lake Mendocino is to release more water from Lake Sonoma. Lake Sonoma stores about three times as much water as Lake Mendocino and is about ninety-one percent full. However, regulatory agencies have indicated that increased releases from Lake Sonoma into Dry Creek are potentially harmful to steelhead and Coho salmon.

In addition, since the State Water Board Order was adopted, the Agency has had problems meeting instream flow requirements in the Russian River due to water diversions by agriculture and municipalities outside of its service area. There is no mechanism for communicating or coordinating such diversions. The Agency requests the State Water Board to encourage the development of agricultural cooperatives to help coordinate and communicate planned diversions. Similar organizations have been successful in addressing local issues with local needs, such as the Dry Creek Valley Agricultural Water Users Corp.

“No one benefits if stored water is lost to the ocean,” said Bob Anderson, executive director of United Winegrowers of Sonoma County. “Hopefully we can find a way to cooperatively succeed in threading the needle.”

“The Agency is facing difficulties implementing the Order to date and has identified several steps that must be taken immediately and long-term to correct the inefficiencies of our water system,” said Director Smith. “We need the necessary tools to properly and effectively manage the Russian River system to benefit all species, including fish and humans.”

In its letter to the State Water Board and its Plan, the Agency identified a need for:

Additional efforts to reduce Agency diversions by 15%.

The Agency has reduced its diversions by 9.9 percent from July 1 through July 15, which is less than the fifteen percent directed by the Order. Temperatures in early July were significantly higher than the corresponding 2004 temperatures (daily high temperatures were approximately five degrees warmer), triggering additional demand. Agency customers will need to undertake additional conservation efforts to meet the requirements of the Order. Agency contractors are currently developing an allocation protocol to respond to the fifteen percent reduction requirement and implementing their allocation reduction will be critical to success. Longer term, the Agency’s Urban Water Management Plan has identified a number of new water conservation requirements (beyond the California Urban Water Conservation Council’s Best Management Practices) and urban reuse opportunities that will result in lower Russian River diversions than would occur without these measures. The Agency will work with all of its contractors to continue to implement these water conservation activities.

All diverters to increase conservation and reuse.

Although the Agency and its contractors are stepping up regional and retail water conservation efforts, as described in the work plan, it will be up to all diverters, including those not served by the Agency, to carry out additional conservation efforts and similarly reduce their diversions. Municipal diverters should also implement new water conservation requirements similar to those identified in the Agency’s Urban Water Management Plan. The Agency has offered assistance to these entities and the State Water Board may wish to consider incorporating the implementation of the additional water conservation measures into the water rights permits of all diverters in the Russian River watershed. The Agency is willing to work with any diverters who are directed by the State Board to reduce their diversions.

A system-wide perspective and stakeholder and regulator partnership for effective management of the Russian River system.

The Russian River supports diverse uses, including fishery, recreation, and municipal and agricultural water supply. Each use has different, and at times competing, needs. For example, in order to preserve storage in Lake Mendocino for the fall salmon migration and still maintain lower Russian River flows needed for summer recreation and water supply, the Agency has had to maintain flows in Dry Creek in the 100 to 140 cubic feet per second (CFS) range. Information developed as part of the Agency’s Endangered Species Act consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), however, identified flows of this level as potentially too high, and thus potentially harmful to rearing habitat for Coho salmon, an endangered species. The Agency will be working with NMFS to evaluate alternatives to solve this problem, which may include implementing permanent changes to existing Russian River minimum streamflow requirements.

Coordination of Russian River diversions by agriculture, municipalities.

Another difficulty maintaining flows results from a lack of coordination among diverters between Lake Mendocino and Dry Creek. During the summer it takes about five to seven days for water released from Lake Mendocino to flow to the Agency’s downstream diversion facilities. There are

numerous agricultural and municipal diverters on that reach of the Russian River. The Agency has no way of knowing when any of those diverters will divert water or how much water they will divert. This means the Agency must release additional water from storage in Lake Mendocino to maintain a “buffer” against unexpectedly increased diversions in order to ensure flows are high enough at downstream compliance points. Often all or part of this “buffer” flows unused into the Pacific Ocean, but occasionally this summer the buffer has not been enough. No mechanism now exists for communication or coordination of diversions, either among the agricultural and municipal diverters or between the diverters and the Agency. Requiring agricultural and municipal diverters to schedule or coordinate diversions in cooperation with the Agency would allow the Agency to reduce the necessary “buffer,” thus preserving storage in Lake Mendocino for the benefit of all water users. However, such a requirement would have to be imposed by the State Water Board, not the Agency.

“The Agency will continue to evaluate these Russian River management challenges and hopes that the State Water Board along with other State and Federal agencies will be willing to help by encouraging the other stakeholders to participate in discussions and evaluations needed to solve these problems,” said James Jasperse, deputy chief engineer of engineering and resource planning.

The work plan is available on the Agency’s website (www.sonomacountywater.org). The work plan details the steps the Agency has taken, and will take, to manage and coordinate efforts by its water contractors, cities and water districts in Sonoma and Marin Counties, along with agricultural communities and municipalities outside of its service area to conserve water this summer and early fall. The Agency was given thirty days from the time the Order was issued on June 13 to develop the work plan.

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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 on the Web at www.sonomacountywater.org.