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Russian River Summer Flows or: Is there enough water to canoe?

By Brenda Adelman

Have you been to the river this summer? Visiting Steelhead Beach recently, we watched a medium-sized dog stand in the middle of the river where the water came only to his shoulders. That was in late June, when flows are generally much higher than in late summer.

Recently, flows at the Hacienda Bridge averaged about 125 cubic feet per second (cfs), which is the minimum required. In comparison, average June flows for the last 45 years was 315 cfs, with 23 cfs the lowest average flow (in draught year 1977) and 1,418 cfs the highest in 1998. In this very hot summer, flows are likely go much lower during the recreation season. Why is this happening and what are the responsible agencies doing about it?

The Russian River is a MANAGED river that is greatly influenced by human activity such as agriculture, recreation, gravel mining, timber harvest, etc. That means that its flow is directly and indirectly controlled by government, with the Sonoma County Water Agency responsible for this situation in summer and run by the County Board of Supervisors to whom you can send your complaints.

The Supervisors also oversee the permit process that has allowed major impacts on the main aquifer by gravel mining. Lack of regulation regarding riparian vegetation removal has also greatly contributed to the problem as do many illegal diversions, not regulated by the State as they should be. The listing of three fish species on the threatened and endangered lists of State and Federal Agencies has greatly complicated the problem of how to provide flows that serve all needs.

The Agency recently held public meetings at three locations to explain the current situation. Unfortunately, only about ten people attended the Guerneville meeting. Pam Jeane, Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) Deputy Chief Engineer of Water Operations, explained, *"The dry weather, coupled with reductions in diversions from the Potter Valley Project, means we are experiencing a water supply situation very similar to last year. The Agency's goal is to save 12,000-15,000 acre-feet in Lake Mendocino by the end of October, 2008. Water supply projections show water levels in Lake Mendocino falling to about 20,000 acre-feet by early fall, a time when the Agency would like to see at least 30,000 acre-feet in Lake Mendocino to release into the upper Russian River for three species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act."*

SCWA staff further described the complexity of the situation. Russian River summer flows come basically from two places: Lake Mendocino where most of the summer water is a result of Eel River diversions. In order to protect that river system, flows have recently been cut back by about one third.

Lake Sonoma is the other source. There is plenty of water in Lake Sonoma to serve all needs, but there is no way yet to access all that is needed, since flow

restrictions to protect the fish have been required by the National Marine Fisheries Service. Higher flows in Dry Creek disturb the life cycle of the endangered species; they also cause a great deal of erosion and habitat disturbance needed for the species to survive, therefore flows are limited to a high of 90 cfs in Dry Creek. This greatly limits water availability to the cities and downstream recreation.

SCWA spent many years preparing a Biological Assessment to describe and address the impacts of their facilities on the endangered fish species. This was submitted to the National Marine Fisheries Service about two years ago. It has been in review and SCWA is waiting for the Agency's release of the Biological Opinion, which will address the issues in the Assessment and tell SCWA what they can and cannot do and what operational changes need to be implemented.

In the meantime, the Sonoma County General Plan Water Element will probably be approved by the Board of Supervisors later this year. There are goals and policies proposed in that document that affect water use in our County.

SCWA was scheduled to release an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) on their long-range water diversions on June 24, 2008. The EIR would have proposed alternatives for accessing Lake Sonoma water, but the Board of Supervisors decided to hold back release of the document until later this year, after the Biological Opinion is released and the General Plan approved. (What a tangled web they weave.) We don't know anyone familiar with the contents of either the EIR or the Biological Opinion. That will have to wait for another day.

In the meantime, SCWA has been trying to get rights to increased water diversions since 1993. Their long-term goal has been to go from 75,000 acre-feet per year to 101,000 acre-feet. This water serves Marin and Sonoma County urban areas having about 600,000 people. As part of the permit process, the contractors have been required to demonstrate extensive conservation practices and they have been somewhat successful in cutting use. Of course, many of the cities are accomplishing this by increasing the use of their local groundwater supplies, which is not a sustainable practice. There is a question of whether they are doing enough.

Finally, the Agency is also looking at revisions on Decision 1610, the regulation that established the 125 cfs minimum flow at Hacienda in the lower river. It is possible that the minimum can be lowered. This would have a major impact on recreation in the lower river. There will be a whole public process on proposed changes and we will keep you informed.