

May, 2009

## **Dear Russian River Supporter:**

### ***Lawns or canoes? Water shortage means severe limits for recreation season.....***

Urban water use in Sonoma County and Marin is at least twice as great in summer as in winter. Coupled with high temperatures that cause evaporation, landscape watering and over-watering commonly accounts for greatly increased water use.

The Russian River is now experiencing one of the worst water shortages since the Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) came into being in the early 1950's. It's a complex story, and for those of us downstream, it's profoundly unfair, since lower river residents themselves use far less water in summer than their urban friends.

For many years, Eel River diversions through the Potter Valley Project have been a major source of our summer water supply. Only recently, diversions from the Eel River to Lake Mendocino through the Potter Valley Project dropped at least 60%, which was double the expected amount. This meant that about 100,000 acre-feet LESS flowed into Lake Mendocino each year which is now about 20,000 acre feet lower than it was in 2007, another water short year. In future dry years, we are now likely to see the shortage become permanent.

On top of that, the Biological Opinion, new Federal law governing flows for threatened fish species, requires that flows down Dry Creek from Lake Sonoma stay below 110 cubic feet per second (cfs), in order to protect juvenile salmonids from encountering rushing streams they could not withstand. This means we cannot make up the supply difference from Lake Sonoma right now, which is about 90% full. The Agency and National Marine Fisheries Service are planning habitat restoration that will slow flows for the fish, and allow more water to be released from Lake Sonoma to serve urban and lower river needs. It may be as much as ten years however, before that is complete.

Consequently, the combination of greatly decreased Eel River diversions and limited Dry Creek releases, dry weather conditions much of this last winter, and legal and illegal draw-downs by agriculture (especially for frost protection), combined with a lack of permit enforcement (responsibility of State Water Board), has lead to the prospect of greatly diminished flows in the lower river this coming summer.

In 2007, the Water Agency was granted an Emergency Order by the State Board to limit lower river flows to "dry year levels" of 85 cubic feet per second (cfs). This year, the County Water Agency, claiming another emergency, petitioned the State Water Board to allow even lower flows this summer. Everyone recognized that this was the fourth emergency request in seven years and the "emergency" was really a management problem. The State Water Board said as much and declared that this Order was really a template for next year's hearings on an anticipated application to **PERMANENTLY CHANGE DECISION 1610, STATE LAW GOVERNING RUSSIAN RIVER FLOWS.**

***Increased conservation demanded by State Board....***

The State Board demanded that stringent conservation requirements be imposed on the Agency customers and that Mendocino dam releases be lowered by 25%. The goal this time was not only save water in the summer so it would be available to migrating fish in the fall as now required by Federal law, but also to have enough water for all uses. The recent Order required, among other things, that water agency customers achieve 25% conservation based on 2004 baseline data. The State Board also required the cessation of commercial turf watering in urban areas and insisted that ground water not be used to lower water use.

The urban contractors are being asked to cut back 25% although not one person has thus far revealed the actual numerical amount. State law allows the Agency to divert a maximum of 37,500 acre-feet per year (AFY) from Lake Mendocino. Yet we do not know how they differentiate between water from Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma to make this determination, since both are upstream of the diversion location. Also, agricultural and other properties divert an unknown amount of water along the way. 60% of the 37,500 AFY, representing summer use, comes to 22,500 acre-feet. 25% of that is 5,625 AFY. The contractors have already saved that amount since 2004, the base year, so we are not even clear what new conservation will be required.

While Santa Rosa has already developed numerous conservation programs, nonetheless, the situation requires that they do much more. Some City officials are angry that the State Board ordered them to eliminate watering commercial turf entirely and are now indicating their resistance to following their direction.

The State Board also ordered the Water Agency to develop a procedure for accounting for private property water rights and a method for determining when the Russian River is being supplemented by Agency releases to identify illegal agricultural water users.

### ***Lower River getting “short end of stick”....***

While normal flows in the lower Russian River are at least 125 cubic feet per second (cfs), and frequently run over 200 cfs, the Emergency Order calls for flows of 85 cfs before July 6<sup>th</sup> and 35 cfs after July 6<sup>th</sup>. This is as much as a 75% decrease and probably means there will be no canoeing or swimming after July 6<sup>th</sup>. It may mean no beach use altogether. The Water Agency will be required to do a lot of water quality monitoring, and if bacteria counts get too high, beaches may have to be closed. Since the 1950's, to our knowledge, there has never been a sustained period when Russian River flows were as low as 35 cfs for an entire summer.

Significant concerns about water quality were expressed in many of the letters Board staff received from lower river citizens. Board members verbalized strong support for the ambitious monitoring and reporting program recommended by the North Coast Regional Board. While no other river business people attended the State Board workshop in Sacramento on May 6<sup>th</sup>, Linda Burke spoke eloquently on behalf of her own canoe business as well as the entire lower river economy. She vividly conveyed the hardships that businesses and visitors would experience if the 35 cfs were sustained.

Towards the end of May, the State Board will be distributing a revised Order that will spell out their expectations on the fulfillment of the above requirements. State Board members had listened very intently and respectfully to all speakers at their meeting on May 6<sup>th</sup> in Sacramento. In spite of fervid requests to lower conservation requirements

and do away with the ban on commercial turf watering, they indicated strong support for meaningful limits. We are running out of water and we no longer have a choice. We must conserve, or we could literally end up with nothing coming out of our taps.

***RRWPC needs your help...more than ever!***

RRWPC has been taking on many challenges, including litigation against the County on the RRCSD Storage Project (described in our last mailer) and our income has not kept up with our costs. **We are currently very much in need of your help.** Please give as generously as you can, especially if you have not donated in awhile, and also please pass this information on to other interested parties who might want to be informed on this issue. We know this is a very hard time and many of you are hurting financially, but even a small amount would be appreciated. We hope to hear from you soon.