



RUSSIAN RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

300 Seminary Ave, Ukiah, CA 95482 • (707) 833-2553 • www.rrwatershed.org

Draft RRWA Environmental Column – March 2011

Understanding the Russian River Biological Opinion

By virtue of the fact that you're reading this article, you are probably more aware of watershed issues than the average resident of the Russian River watershed. So, we're challenging you to respond to four questions that are key to understanding changes in the Russian River. The answers may surprise you.

1. Can you name one of three fish in the Russian River that are on the endangered species list?
2. Why were flows in the Russian River lower last summer?
3. Why is Dry Creek important to our region's water supply?
4. Do you know that the Russian River has an estuary? If so, do you know why the estuary is important to fish health?

Question 1: The Russian River is home to three fish on the endangered species list: coho salmon (which are endangered) and Chinook salmon and steelhead (which are threatened). In 2008, a federal agency issued a 15-year blueprint, called the Russian River Biological Opinion, to help restore these fish. To increase the chances of survival for these species, the Biological Opinion requires the Sonoma County Water Agency – which is a wholesale supplier of water to about 600,000 customers– to make changes to the way it uses the Russian River for water supply.

Question 2: Many people believe that drought is the reason the Water Agency released less water from Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma last summer. This was true in past years. But beginning in summer 2010, the Biological Opinion requires lower river flows regardless of weather conditions. This is because the Biological Opinion found that summertime flows in the Russian River are too high for young fish. Less water in the river means that there is less water available for residents to use. By conserving water, you can ensure that there is enough to go around for everyone and that the fish have a healthier environment.

Question 3: Dry Creek connects Lake Sonoma to the Russian River. In the summer, Dry Creek is home to young coho and steelhead and fast flowing water in the creek is detrimental to their growth. The Biological Opinion requires the Water Agency to enhance six miles of habitat in the 14-mile long creek in order to continue using Dry Creek for water delivery. These habitat enhancements include creating backwaters, riffles and shady, protected areas that will provide refuge for young coho and steelhead.

Question 4: The Russian River estuary is located where the river meets the Pacific Ocean near Jenner. The estuary is a nursery for young steelhead. The Biological Opinion requires that the Water Agency manage the sandbar at the mouth of the estuary to create a summer freshwater lagoon, which is believed to be a healthier environment for these young fish. Traditionally, when the sandbar would close and water levels would threaten low-lying properties, the Water Agency would cut a v-shaped ditch that would allow water from the estuary to flow out. The freshwater lagoon that began to form behind the sandbar would be lost and the estuary would be open to the ocean tides again. Now, under the Biological Opinion, when the sandbar closes between May 15 and October 15, the Water Agency must create a lagoon outlet that will allow some river water to flow out (to reduce the risk of flooding to low-lying properties) but that won't entirely open the estuary.

Finally, to measure if conditions are improving for coho, steelhead and Chinook, the Biological Opinion requires extensive monitoring of the Russian River, Dry Creek and the estuary.

The Biological Opinion requirements aren't free. People living in cities or water districts that purchase water from the Water Agency will likely notice small increases to their rates this year. Implementation of the Biological Opinion is



RUSSIAN RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

300 Seminary Ave, Ukiah, CA 95482 • (707) 833-2553 • www.rrwatershed.org

responsible for an increase of about 2 percent for most water customers. No one likes to pay more for necessities, especially in today's economy. But the dollars we invest now will avoid higher costs and secure our water for tomorrow – and could ensure the future of three critical species.

This article was authored by Pam Jeane, Assistant General Manager, Sonoma County Water Agency on behalf of the Russian River Watershed Association. RRWA (www.rrwatershed.org) is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration, and watershed enhancement.