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Water Issue Update

By Brenda Adelman

We've had a lot of rain this winter, or at least a normal amount. We should be relieved of worrying about next summer's river flows, right? Wrong! More money for less water....

Santa Rosa ratepayers did an outstanding job conserving water use last summer. In fact, they did such a great job, their fees will be going up 8% for each of the next two years in order to compensate for the 20% increase in water delivery charges by the Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA). Furthermore, the City may then have access to additional water supplies to use for new growth, if that ever happens, should another shortage be declared.

It's complicated! SCWA needs more money for water because water sales have been way down the last few years as a result of water contractors' successful fulfillment of the State Water Board's demand for 25% conservation. Furthermore, Agency costs have gone way up because of the demands of the Federal Biological Opinion (BO) intended to save three threatened and endangered species, Coho and Chinook salmon and Steelhead Trout. They are also faced with the need for a new pipeline to Marin and Petaluma. Their current pipeline is severely stressed during peak demand periods and needs to be either greatly improved or replaced at great expense. That south pipeline (to another watershed) delivers over one third of the Water Agency's allocation.

Half the water is being sold to districts outside of the watershed....

To give you a sense of last year's water use and a sense of proportion about who is using what, in all of 2009, Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park and Cotati used a little over 22,000 acre feet of Russian River water. Petaluma, North Marin Water District, and Marin Municipal Water District used about the same amount. Others, including Sonoma, Valley of the Moon, Windsor, and other small districts used a little over 5000 acre feet (total of about 49,000 AFY). That means that about half of the Water Agency's water deliveries are consumed outside of the Russian River watershed.

Adding to the shortage problem, because of a three year dry period, summer diversions from the Eel River have recently decreased by about two thirds, causing critical shortages

in the Russian River. Consequently, SCWA also needs to spend a great deal of money developing alternative supplies, including the exploration of ground water sources in the Santa Rosa plain and increased access to Lake Sonoma water. (SCWA currently delivers about 5000 to 7000 acre feet of groundwater to contractors beyond what is taken from the Russian River.)

Biological Opinion and mandated low flows....

The Biological Opinion demands a regime of lowered summer flows in the upper and lower river and also in Dry Creek, in order to have adequate cold water in the reservoirs for the fall fish migration. This will involve the revision of Decision 1610, State Law governing Russian River (main stem) flows. We have been informed that this process has begun, that the public will be given notice for the release of documents, and will be notified of future public hearings for commenting on the proposed changes.

All last summer, flows at Hacienda between Forestville and Guerneville averaged around 70 cubic feet per second. That is the same amount that the Biological Opinion calls for on an annual basis (Decision 1610 currently calls for a minimum of 125 cfs during a normal rainfall year.). Unfortunately, recreation and water quality is greatly affected at those low levels and there are many concerns about making this a permanent flow regime. This will play out further in the coming year.

Biological Opinion and Dry Creek habitat improvements....

In addition, the Biological Opinion also requires six miles of habitat improvements for Dry Creek in order to slow flows down to a rate that won't harm juvenile fish. If after building half of the improvements over the next eight years, the project does not appear to successfully slow the flows, then a bypass pipeline from Lake Sonoma to the river will be considered. The pipeline feasibility study recently began, however, in order to examine potential alternative routes and develop cost figures for the possible project.

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