



FRIENDS OF THE EEL RIVER

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

One River is Dying for Water, One River is Drowning

SCIENTISTS CONFIRM MISMANAGEMENT BY PG&E IS KILLING TWO NORTHERN CALIFORNIA RIVERS AND DEGRADING SALMON HABITAT

Friends of the Eel River Takes Legal Action

Sausalito, CA, March 1, 2010 -- Today the Friends of the Eel River (FOER) brought legal action before the State Water Resources Control Board (State Board) in an attempt to stop PG&E from destroying two northern California rivers essential to the restoration of California's once-vibrant billion dollar salmon industry. The FOER legal action challenges the diversion of almost all of the flow of the Eel River to PG&E's Potter Valley hydroelectric project (PVP), consisting of two dams and a diversion tunnel. During the dry season, almost 98% of the Eel River flows are diverted in to the Russian River. "The State Board has an obligation to ensure that PG&E's use of water is reasonable and does not harm public trust resources in the Eel River," note environmental attorney Ellison Folk with the law firm Shute, Mihaly & Weinberger. PG&E's Potter Valley Project, however, is damaging the public trust resources by threatening the survival of the remaining populations of the State and federally listed endangered salmon and steelhead, in exchange for a negligible amount of energy it produces.

Experts state that the amount of energy that PG&E obtains from the Eel River diversions provides, at peak, only 9.4 Megawatts--- about the equivalent of four large windmills.

The small amount of energy provided by the dam comes at a high biological and cultural cost, to native species, First Americans (Tribes), and the California public at large.

The action is a result of studies by many of the leading salmon and freshwater experts, including the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), whose data shows that PG&E's water management system, is drying up the Eel River and over watering the Russian River . Both are lethal to California's once teeming populations of Coho and Chinook salmon and steelhead. For millennia these fish spawned in freshwaters of the Eel and the Russian Rivers, regenerating their populations so vital to the survival of a healthy ecosystem and to local economies.

FOER has been perplexed that PG&E, an institution that has done good things for the environment, would act in ways so destructive of these rivers and their salmon. “If PG&E ran this project for the benefit of the salmon, they would have to release so much water to the Eel River, the project would not be economic”, said fisheries biologist Pat Higgins.

After further investigation, FOER concluded that it wasn't the energy but the water. PG&E's PVP is a water delivery system in the guise of a power plant. Eel river water is moved across watersheds and counties, which creates financial and development opportunities for PG&E, agriculture and municipal water users. This comes at the expense of endangered species.

“We are watching these rivers die needlessly,” said Bill Reynolds, landowner and farmer “The Eel River is my lifeblood and that of all the riverside economies within its 3,684 square miles, including sport and commercial fishing. It is also the lifeblood of the profound wildlife that feeds on the returning salmon, carrying important ocean nutrients deep into the watershed.” He continued, “With the demise of the salmon will be the loss of one of the largest watershed ecosystems in the State of California. We need to restore the health of the Eel River and Russian River and bring their salmon back,”

Once these rivers supported a rich Alaska-like concentration of wildlife – grizzly bear, wolves, eagles, redwood forests -- cycling nutrients back and forth, from ocean to mountain.

There were over 500,000 salmon in the Eel River Basin before the operation of PG&E's PVP hydroelectric operations. Last year's count came in at fewer than 500. And on the Russian River, the threat to endangered salmon and steelhead is equally dire. During the peak spawning months, the diversion of Eel River water into the Russian River creates flows that have been too high for fish in critical reaches of the Russian River, and which must be reduced by a mandate of NMFS' *Russian River Biological Opinion 2008*.

The Eel River is the third largest producer of salmon, and second largest producer of steelhead in the state. It contributed to what was a billion dollar a year salmon industry in California that is now moribund due to mismanagement of water resources. The Eel River was considered a world-class fishery, but now commercial and sports fishing and its economic contribution to the region is virtually nonexistent.

Historically the Eel River fishery also once sustained the First American people on the Eel River, as well as along the North Coast, from Eureka to Bodega Bay.

Given the enormous benefits of restoring the Eel River's fisheries, economic, scenic, and recreation values, there are relatively small costs for doing so. FOER challenges the State Water Resource Board (SWRCB) to eliminate PG&E's current water rights for the PVP to protect public trust resources on the Eel River and prevent unreasonable use of water. This Petition could be granted on its own and in conjunction with the SWRCB's reconsideration of operations at Lake Mendocino and flows of the Russian River.

“It's not too late,” said Nandananda, Executive Director of FOER. “But we must act quickly as the fish are on the verge of total collapse. We would like to work with PG&E and SWRCB to restore this extraordinary jewel of the public trust.”

The decline of California salmon can be viewed as dominos falling. The Eel River salmon were the first to fall, then the Klamath/Trinity River and now the Sacramento/San Joaquin. All are

caused by a combination of dams, diversions, and watershed mismanagement. Restoration of the Eel River's endangered salmon species would restore a fishery whose potential economic value exceeds \$50 million annually and thousands of jobs – and stop the freefall of one of California's largest and richest river systems.

Backgrounder FOER

Friends of the Eel River, founded in 1994, has been acknowledged and praised for its devotion to the monitoring, defense and advocacy of the Eel River watershed. Through the education and support of residents, businesses and visitors in this third largest watershed in California, FOER has become a formidable challenger of large corporations and public agencies in the interest of preserving California's North Coast public trust resources. FOER is supported by over 2500 members, a solid volunteer base, a large contingent of scientists and fisheries experts, sport fishing alliances, river enthusiasts, and concerned citizens who are working together to meet the challenges to the Eel River's watershed integrity.

In addition to many legal interventions and victories on behalf of the Eel River, FOER has allied with advocates of the Russian River watershed to address the damages caused by the Eel River's diversion to the Russian River; specifically the high flows that are threatening the State and federally listed Russian River's endangered species of salmon and steelhead. Through this alliance Friends of the Eel highlights the need for bioregions to work together for the benefit of watershed integrity. Healthy forests, soils, fish, wildlife, air, and rivers are all of our concern and legacy. www.eelriver.org

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