

Use of Eel River water needs discussion before decisions

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At this time of year, almost any year, it's easy to see that the Eel River around Fortuna needs water. The river is shallow, it's warm and it's choked with algae. It's also heavy with salmon.

This year is no different. Recent dives sponsored by Friends of the Eel River have yielded a rough count of the number of fish caught in a few big holes in the

Fortuna and Fernbridge area. These fish are a large part of what remains of a once-legendary run of chinook salmon. Known for their particularly large size, these Eel River salmon drew fishing tourists from hundreds of miles away. Today, they struggle.

It turns out that there is additional water to be had that could improve conditions for these salmon at this time of year. As part of the amended federal license for Pacific Gas and Electric Co.'s Potter Valley Project -- which creates hydropower and diverts water to the east branch of the Russian River -- the diversion has been cut by 15 percent to benefit salmon. But there is more water: some 2,500 acre feet that is available at the discretion of state and federal agencies for use, as needed, to improve conditions for salmon.

That water has not been used since it was put aside

in 2004. Many people connected to the highly

nanced functions of the Eel River to Russian River diversion were unaware until recently that the water was available.

At first blush, it would seem that more water should be sent down the river to help the salmon in the

lower river move upstream toward spawning grounds. That might feel good, but it may not be what's best, and it isn't generally what happened historically until fall rains began. The agencies are rightly concerned that sending the water down now could stimulate a migration into upper reaches of the river where the salmon would be trapped again, and be particularly vulnerable to predators.

The agencies are wrong, however, in apparently not having developed a plan to use the water if needed, or determine under what conditions that water would be used. In California, having water but not using it seems a risky decision. What's needed is an open discussion on how such a small -- but not insignificant -- amount of water should be used. It shouldn't be a

difficult discussion for biologists and hydrologists to have, but in the interest of fairness, they should be

willing to answer questions on the issue before they make a decision.

The best forum for the discussion is the Eel-Russian River Commission, made up of county representatives and others with a stake in the two North Coast streams. The commission, it seems, exists specifically to hash out issues like this, and we hope the state and federal agencies will acknowledge the important role it plays in safeguarding this precious Northern California



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