

Eel River Flows Still Too Low in Peak Salmon Spawning Period + RVITs Comments to FERC

– DECEMBER 3, 2015

This month's rainfall and cooler temperatures have helped lessen the strain on salmon migrating on the Eel River, but not near enough to ease the concerns of local researchers. And they have their reasons.

*By: Will Houston
November 29, 2015
Eureka Times Standard*

Since Chinook salmon began entering the drought-stricken river this year, they were met with near-historic low flows preventing their upriver migration to spawning areas, a currently unexplained blindness and "zombie-like" behavior, poachers, and cars running over what spawning grounds they can find.

"It's a hard thing to watch," Eel River Recovery Project board member and research diver Eric Stockwell said.

So far, Stockwell said, there have been a reports of a few hundred fish having made it to the main stem Eel River and the South Fork Eel River about 20 to 30 miles south of Fortuna.

National Marine Fisheries Service fish biologist Zane Ruddy said this time of year is a "peak" time for salmon spawning, but added that salmon would normally be much farther upriver and would have spread out among different tributaries. Instead, many of them have been forced to lay their eggs right on the river due to the low flows, which presents several uncertainties.

"This is the time," Ruddy said. "It's not to say that they can't be successful in spawning in place. It all depends on the flows that occur after they spawn."

If a large number of fish can't reach their preferred spawning ground, they'll lay the eggs on the river and essentially "put all their eggs in one basket," Ruddy said.

These fish run the risk of having their eggs scoured should a strong winter storm touch down on the area and wash them away. Ruddy said the Chinook salmon are able to "diversify the risk" and increase the chance of their offsprings' survival by spreading out among different tributaries.

Spawning success relies on a fragile balance with river flows.

Ruddy said that salmon will not move upriver until triggered to do so by high river flows caused by storm events.

While a few spurts of rain have allowed some fish to move, U.S. Geological Survey flow data shows the Eel River flows near Scotia are currently at only one-sixth of their normal levels of about 1,400 cubic feet per second.

"If you look at storms last year, we had flows over 10,000 cubic feet per second and sustained storms from November and all the way through December," Ruddy said. "This year we haven't had any substantial storms."

Ruddy said fish would normally be showing up at the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's Van Arsdale fish counting station near Willits around now, but none have made it as of Tuesday.

Stockwell said the salmon that are currently spawning are those that entered the river in the late summer and early fall. During this long wait, some of the fish crowded in small pools that were filled with oxygen-consuming algae.

As a result of these stressful conditions, many fish showed strange signs of blindness and lethargy to the point that researchers could hover their hand over the fish's face with no reaction. Fish samples are currently being assessed at the University of California Davis to determine the cause of these troubling symptoms.

Some of these "zombie fish" have made it to the main stem about 20 miles south of Fortuna, though Stockwell did not know if they were spawning.

For the fish that have just been entering the river from Fernbridge, Stockwell said the rains and cool temperatures will cushion them from these poor conditions.

"I think that it's almost impossible that these fresher fish coming in are going to be affected by what got the fish with the lower flows and warmer temperatures," he said.

That doesn't mean there aren't challenges. Evidence of poachers has been seen along the banks of the river, including one instance where a rearing female's eggs were found on the gravel, Stockwell said.

Near High Rock on the South Fork Eel River, Stockwell said he and others have been noticing tire tracks going across the river.

"When the river is low the places to cross are at the head of a riffle. But it's also the place that salmon spawn," Stockwell said. "Usually this time of year the river would have gone up so much that people wouldn't be driving on the river. This is one of the bad things about the drought."

Two Issues With Your Story on Eel River Flow

Letter to the Editor
December 2, 2015

Thank you for Will Houston's informative, well-written story ("Flows far too low in peak spawning period," Times-Standard, Dec. 1, Page A1). Two aspects of the story unfortunately diminish its strengths.

First, the reference to Van Arsdale as a fish counting station near Willits.

Van Arsdale is PG&E's 107-year-old silted up reservoir, which sits in the river midstream, enabling the shunting of Eel River water through a tunnel and into the Russian River watershed, feeding grapes and cities rather than supporting salmon. Cape Horn Dam (a dam not much taller than the Beach Boys tour bus I saw parked alongside Hotel Arcata), holds back this reservoir and blocks salmon, steelhead, and lamprey in their upriver migration. The fish ladder built to help salmon over the dam makes a good fish counting station, but it doesn't make up for the harm the Cape Horn and Scott dams do to the Eel River.

Second, for heaven's sake kindly do not refer to "zombie fish." This only adds insult to injury, as these salmon are not healthy. Your readership deserves excellence in reporting.

Pamela Netzow, Trinidad; member, board of directors, Friends of the Eel River

Round Valley Indian Tribes file motion to intervene

November 30, 2015

Round Valley Indian Tribes (RVIT) file motion to intervene and comments with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) regarding PG&E's application for temporary variance of minimum flow requirements, citing PG&E's failure to release pulse flows negotiated by the Potter Valley Drought Working Group to assist Chinook migration and spawning.

The Tribes appreciate the diligent work of the [Potter Valley Drought] Working Group, and remain committed to working with all stakeholders involved to appropriately manage flows to ensure a viable habitat for Chinook salmon to spawn while ensuring the safety of Lake Pillsbury. PG&E's failure to comply with the negotiated pulse schedule, responsibly study the effects of storage levels and dam safety, unwillingness to implement emergency safety improvement to dam infrastructure, reluctance to increase releases to compensate for their error or uphold previous pulse flow agreements, and failure to voluntarily and immediately report their mistake to FERC, risks the efficacy and sustainability of those efforts.

[Read RVIT's full comments here.](#)

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