

Feds clear PG&E to cut flows for Eel River fish

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By Scott Greacen



Utility cites risk of sediment collapse; drained reservoir may run dry.



Lake Pillsbury on the upper Eel River: By late January, water levels in the reservoir behind Scott Dam were 50 feet below the high water mark. Photo: David Keller.

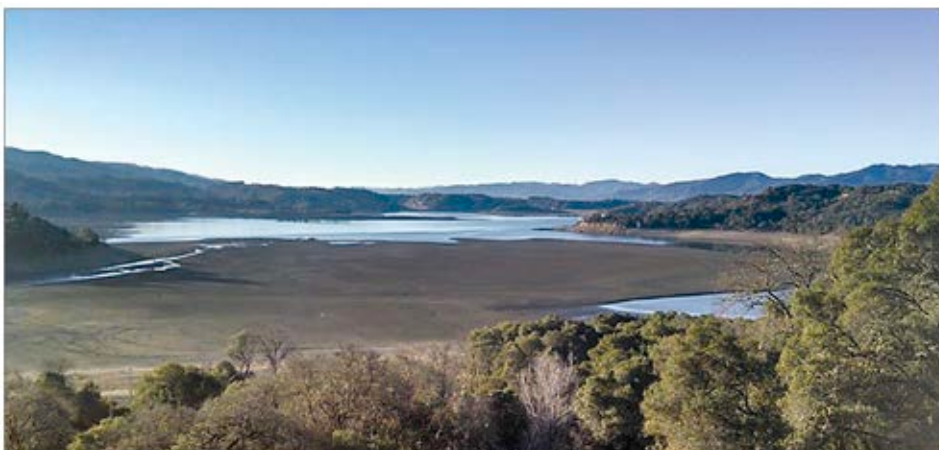
A few people in the Russian River watershed still have a greater claim to the Eel's water than do the river's own salmon. After draining its reservoir ("Lake" Pillsbury) into the Russian River with business-as-usual diversions to benefit the irrigators of Potter Valley all through the long, dry summer of 2013, PG&E turned to the Eel River's struggling fish this winter and said essentially "Oops, guess you're out of luck."

That's just one of the ways that management of the Eel River watershed in this still-developing drought exemplifies what Peter Gleick calls "the unraveling crazy

quilt of western water management and use." It is a framework that fails to protect the public trust, but allows the well-connected to leverage public water for private gain.

The story turns on the malfunction of an obscure set of rules meant to make PG&E manage the two dams and diversion tunnel of its Potter Valley Project (PVP) to have less impact on Eel River fish, but it illuminates a premise that has not changed since the dams were built, the tunnel dug and the upper Eel's waters diverted down to Lake Mendocino: Russian River interests' claims on Eel River water are honored even to the detriment of Eel River fish.

Fortunately, our chance to correct history's error by decommissioning the Potter Valley Project dams is just around the corner, with relicensing due in 2022. For most of the 20th century, the two dams of the Potter Valley Project not only blocked off the prime spawning grounds of the snow-fed Gravelly Valley on the upper mainstem Eel River, but diverted most of the flow of the upper Eel into the Russian River. The damage inflicted on the Eel River's fisheries by the dams alone was dramatic, and in combination with other cumulative impacts, catastrophic.



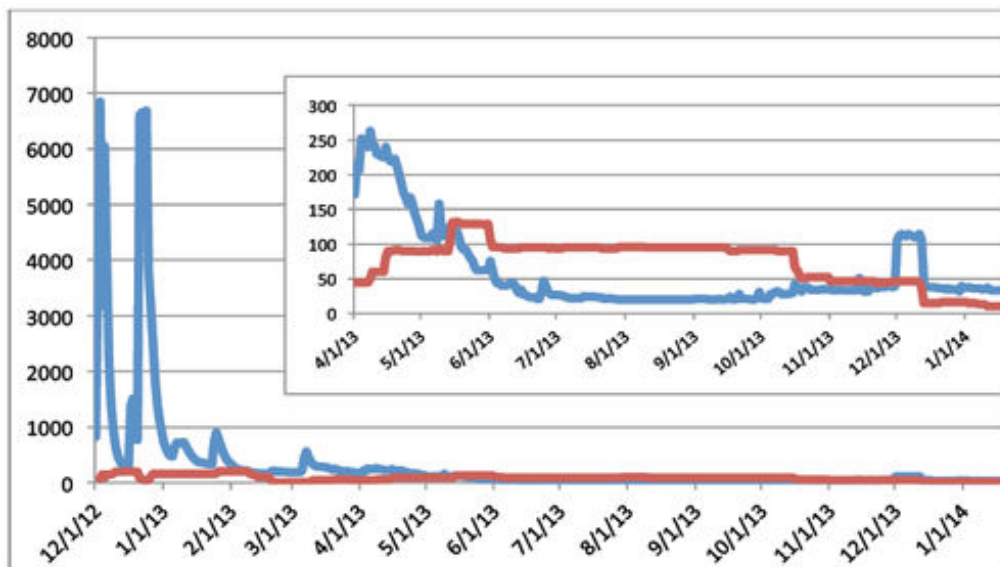
Lake Mendocino on the upper Russian River. The East Branch of the Russian, augmented by Eel River water sent down the diversion tunnel to Potter Valley, flows in its old bed, exposed as water levels drop behind the Army Corps of Engineers' Coyote Dam east of Ukiah. Photo: Mark Lovelace.

The three remaining species of salmon and steelhead in the Eel River were listed under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) in the 1990s. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS)—charged with protecting and recovering species that swim in the ocean, including salmon—finally forced PG&E to alter its releases to harm Eel River fish less with rules adopted in 2004.

At the time, Friends of the Eel River (FOER) protested to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), which licenses hydro-power dams, that the new rules would still allow serious impacts on Eel River salmon and steelhead during low flows. Those concerns fell on deaf ears.

So in 2013, though it mostly did not rain from January to June, PG&E continued to send more than 80 cfs (cubic feet per second) down the diversion tunnel from April through October. More than 50,000 acre feet of water went down to Potter Valley. But then it still didn't rain in the fall, and PG&E found itself with relatively little water left in the reservoir at the beginning of December 2013.

Following the flows schedule, the utility began releasing 100 cfs down the mainstem Eel River on December 1, but immediately applied to FERC for an urgent variance. Unless it reduced the Eel River releases back down to the 25 cfs that had been the summer baseline, PG&E said, it would risk running out of water in the reservoir altogether in the spring of 2014, as well as damage to the reservoir infrastructure and harms to downstream fish habitat likely to result if the walls of sediment emerging from the draining reservoir were to suffer a "vertical bank collapse." FERC approved the requested variance, but allowed an after-the-fact comment period, soliciting public input into how best to address such circumstances in the future.



Winter flows and summer diversions, 2013: flow in cubic feet per second (cfs) for upper Eel River releases below the Cape Horn dam (in blue) and diversions to the Russian River through the Potter Valley tunnel (in red).

While even in the very dry 2013, winter flows dwarf summer releases, and Eel flows are much higher than the Russian, a closer look at summer shows the picture reversed: diversions to the Russian stayed above 80 cfs from April through October 2013.

Underscoring the importance of the initial "temporary" decision, on January 15, the day before comments were due on the first variance, PG&E submitted an additional request for another variance. The net effect of the successive variances will be to allow the utility to release as little as 25 cfs down the Eel River, until either the reservoir is depleted or rains come. The observant reader will have noted that at no point during the summer did PG&E seek a variance to diminish diversions to the Russian River, which would have left the utility with some options if fall rains failed.

While state and federal wildlife agencies signed off on PG&E's variance requests, the Round Valley Indian Tribes (RVIT) objected to any continued diversions to the Russian River. In our comments, FOER agreed with the RVIT and argued as well that the cumulative impact of low flows and PVP operations on Eel River salmon merits reopening the project's license to improve its low-flow provisions.

Current projections say it's unlikely, but if spring rains do come, it's not clear PG&E would allow the water to flow down the river. Clearly, the utility continues to treat the desires of Potter Valley irrigators for cheap Eel River water as a claim equivalent, or possibly even superior, to the need of surviving Eel River chinook and steelhead for enough water to spawn and reproduce another generation. When Gleick suggests western water management must change, he's talking about how just such a combination of inappropriate infrastructure and entrenched entitlement has proven so hazardous to western ecosystems and so resistant to evolution.