

Drying Times are Trying Times for Eel River Fish

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Serial Variance Requests Reveal Vulnerability of Eel River Fisheries to Demands from Russian River Irrigators

The Eel River's surviving salmonids—chinook, coho, and steelhead—are struggling to come back from near-extinction. Good returns from 2010 to 13, particularly for chinook, felt like recovery might be getting underway. Unfortunately, the succeeding seasons turned into years of historic drought, which have hit the fish hard.

Recent events drive home the fact that the Potter Valley Project's dams and diversion tunnel aren't helping the Eel's fish. The interests who benefit from diverting water from the upper Eel into the Russian River are not much concerned with the fate of Eel River salmon and steelhead; instead, they see in the drought an opportunity to take more water from the Eel River. Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E)—owner of the Potter Valley Project's two dams and diversion tunnel—is glad to work around even inadequate fish protections to give more Eel River water away. State and federal agencies charged with protecting fish are happy to help bend the rules.



Increasing demands for water diversions from the Eel River to Russian River irrigators mean worsening conditions for spawning and migrating salmon. Photo: USFWS.

FOER has long argued the operating rules for the Potter Valley Project—the two dams on the upper mainstem Eel and diversion tunnel to Potter Valley—don't protect Eel River fish in low water years. After Eel River salmon and steelhead were listed by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) under the Endangered Species Act, FERC (the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission) required PG&E to follow a flow schedule laid out by NMFS that roughly mimics river flows without the dams.

To reduce flows into the Eel any further, PG&E must get a variance from FERC. In December of 2013, with the assent of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and NMFS, PG&E got a variance to reduce flows to the mainstem Eel below the 100 cubic feet per second (cfs) otherwise required to aid fish migration. In January, PG&E sought an extension for the variance; with the information we had, FOER supported the extension.

What PGE failed to tell us, and FERC, was that the fall chinook migration up the Cape Horn dam fish ladder halted as soon as flows dropped when the first variance was granted in mid-December 2013. Only 162 chinook made it up the Van Arsdale fish ladder (compared to more than 3000 in previous years), but as soon as PG&E cut the flows down the dam, the fish stopped coming up the ladder. The cutoff of the flows left the chinook to spawn in the mainstem Eel, a choice that risked redds being scoured by big storms (which luckily did not happen this spring). To cut the flows without even weighing impacts on chinook migration does not reflect the importance of critically imperiled salmon as a precious public trust resource.

That variance ended when heavy rains finally fell in February and March. But another request came in early April—this time from the Redwood Valley County Water District (RVCWD), which serves an area northeast of Willits in Mendocino county (where some 4000 people and 200,000 acres of wine grapes have been planted despite its notorious lack of a reliable water supply). Following the lead of Potter Valley wine grape growers who complain that Eel River water “wastes to the sea,” the RVCWD asked PGE to divert “extra” flows in the Eel to supply irrigation demands in Redwood Valley.

Of course, there is no “extra” water in the Eel when young chinook are trying to migrate downstream in a drought year. Nonetheless, both PGE and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife seemed happy to comply. It was only at the last minute that NMFS’s lawyers pointed out that the proposal, couched as an “emergency,” didn’t qualify as an emergency under FERC rules.

Now, Redwood Valley’s failed pitch for Eel River water has become the focus of a rising campaign by Russian River irrigators to demand more water from the Eel generally, in anticipation of the coming fight over relicensing of the Potter Valley Project (which must be completed by 2022). The Mendocino County Board of Supervisors voted on May 6 to send a bitter, misinformed protest letter to NMFS. In the process, both Supervisor Brown and the vituperative John McCowen went out of their way to attack FOER’s position and to belittle our Bay Area Director, David Keller, when he attempted to point out their errors.

As ever, to be abused by such craven champions of anti-environmentalism is a badge of honor. The movement to bust deadbeat dams is rising. Elected officials who would drive our precious fish to extinction for the profits of a few risk being swept away in a different kind of flood.