



For Immediate Release

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PG&E Delaying Eel River Dam Removal

On Thursday, June 6 the Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) informed federal regulators that it would like a 6-month extension to submit its Final License Surrender Application and plan to decommission two Eel River dams that block access to hundreds of miles of prime salmon habitat. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) was expecting the utility to file its Draft Surrender Application plan this month, with a final version due in January 2025. PG&E now says it will fail to meet that deadline and instead file its draft plan in January 2025 followed by the final version in late July 2025.

In announcing the delay, PG&E expressed support for the still vague proposal for the New Eel-Russian Facility and stated that its six-month delay was to allow proponents of that proposal to have more time to work out the details. The proposal would build a dam-free diversion facility to continue transfer of some Eel River water to the Russian River. As proposed, the diversion facility would be constructed concurrently with dam removal and managed by the newly formed Eel Russian Project Authority. PG&E is working with the proponents of the New Eel-Russian Facility¹ to develop an agreement for the diversion facility's construction "that aligns with PG&E's Surrender Application and Decommissioning Plan."

The Eel River was once one of the most productive salmon producing rivers in the state with runs of up to a million fish in good years supporting robust tribal, recreational, and commercial fisheries. But a number of factors have degraded habitat and reduced populations to a fraction of their historic numbers, resulting in the listing of many native fish populations as Threatened or Endangered. Experts agree that dam removal would be beneficial in efforts to recover Chinook salmon and steelhead.

"The Eel River's native fish don't have time to spare, and Eel River residents have waited long enough to see the justice that is dam removal," said Alicia Hamann, Executive Director for Friends of the Eel River.

¹ The proponents of the NERF are Sonoma County Water Agency, Mendocino County Inland Water and Power Commission, Humboldt County, Round Valley Indian Tribes, California Trout, Trout Unlimited, and California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

“We understand that PG&E hopes a short delay now will prevent a longer delay later in the decommissioning process. We are wary, however, that PG&E and the proponents appear to be departing from their previous position that arrangements for a potential continued diversion will not delay Eel River dam removal.”

“The health of the Eel River has been degraded by the Potter Valley project for far too long. It’s surprising that even with the critical seismic safety issues at Scott Dam, that PG&E and the proponents of continued Eel River diversions are willing to request delays despite the risk to safety and ongoing impacts to the river,” said Scott Harding of American Whitewater.

Samantha Kannry is director of TRIB Research and an expert on salmon and steelhead in the Eel River watershed. Kannry notes that “while this delay seems minor, it is already years into the decommissioning process, and likely not the last proposed delay. The delays and extensions in these protracted bureaucratic processes have a way of accumulating and resulting in significant losses of precious time for the recovery of imperiled native fishes.”

Because the Eel River dams continue to create harmful conditions for the Eel River’s native fish, even a six-month delay can mean significant impacts to an entire year-class of fish. Especially when operated to maximize summertime irrigation supplies to the Russian River, Scott Dam’s unnaturally warm releases create nearly-lethal temperatures for juvenile steelhead in the Eel River between the dams. Cape Horn Dam has a faulty fish ladder that clogs with sediment under high flows and acts as a pinch point in salmon migration creating a hotspot for predators.

About the Eel River Dams:

Situated 20 miles northeast of Ukiah on the Eel River, the Potter Valley Project includes two dams on the Eel River, a diversion tunnel that redirects water from the Eel River watershed to the East Branch of the Russian River, and a powerhouse. The project's owner, Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), has allowed its federal hydropower license to lapse and is currently working with federal regulators to surrender the license and remove the Project’s facilities.

Many of the Project’s facilities, including Scott and Cape Horn Dams are over a hundred years old. Due to equipment failures in 2021, PG&E has permanently halted hydropower operations. Furthermore, water storage in Lake Pillsbury, the reservoir created by Scott Dam, has been reduced by more than 25% as an emergency measure to address seismic safety concerns.

Scott Dam entirely blocks fish passage to the prime cold-water habitats in the Eel River headwaters, while the smaller Cape Horn diversion dam has an outdated fish ladder that requires upgrades to comply with current environmental standards.

Removing the Eel River dams would transform the Eel into California’s longest free-flowing river, opening up nearly 300 miles of cold-water habitat for salmon and steelhead. Conservation and

commercial fishing groups have long advocated for restoring the Eel River to its natural state. In 2023, American Rivers designated the Eel as one of America's Most Endangered Rivers, citing the Potter Valley Project dams as major threats to the survival of Chinook salmon, steelhead, and Pacific lamprey.

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