

Russian River Coho Water Resources Partnership

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Cooperative Projects are Paying off for Russian River Coho Recovery

Sonoma County, Calif. – Increasing numbers of coho salmon are returning to the Russian River this year, likely resulting from a successful hatchery release program and improved ocean conditions. According to information recently released by the Army Corps of Engineers, there were 5,375 wild “young-of-the-year” coho in 18 of 23 tributaries surveyed between May and September. This compares with 715 wild fish counted on seven of 11 streams in 2010 and a total of only 637 wild juveniles counted during the five years prior on four of nine streams. While recovery goals are still many years away, the long term sustainability of coho populations in the watershed is looking more hopeful through cooperative habitat enhancement and streamflow projects with private landowners.

Last spring, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation awarded \$600,000 to the Russian River Coho Water Resources Partnership, which is working to improve stream flows and water supply reliability in five tributaries of the Russian River critical to the recovery of endangered coho salmon. The funding augments a 2010 Foundation grant to support restoration efforts in five priority streams: Dutch Bill, Grape, Green Valley, Mark West, and Mill creeks. The grant was made possible by a matching contribution from the Sonoma County Water Agency for its restoration and monitoring work in the Russian River watershed.

“Thanks to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant, we have been able to bring together a lot of people of various backgrounds and interests, and focus on priority areas to make the biggest difference,” says Mary Ann King, Stewardship Coordinator for Trout Unlimited in California. “By providing better habitat for returning spawners, we are increasing the chances their offspring will survive and complete their life cycle in the wild, so that someday we won’t have to rely on a broodstock program,” stated Mariska Obedzinski, fish biologist for UC Cooperative Extension and CA Sea Grant Program.



The Partnership, now in its second year, uses a science-based approach to identify areas with the greatest opportunities for better water management and improvements to habitat that benefit coho recovery.

The number of coho salmon in the Russian River watershed has declined precipitously in recent decades. Although multiple factors have harmed the population, resource agencies have found that low flows and water diversions can be especially problematic in tributaries of the Russian River. Working under the hypothesis that through careful management there is enough water for people, farms and fish, the Partnership models the dynamics of water supply and water needs of humans and natural systems in each project watershed. These models, along with fish monitoring data, help identify both the environmental thresholds necessary for coho survival, and the water conservation and storage projects that will ensure these thresholds are met.

In the Grape Creek watershed, the Partnership is working with key landowners to address specific streamflow recovery goals. Water management projects, when completed in 2012, will improve streamflow in approximately 1.6 miles of Grape Creek. Similar efforts are underway in Dutch Bill and Green Valley creeks, and project opportunities are being identified in Mill and Mark West creeks. The long-term goals of the Partnership are to restore a more natural flow regime during the dry season, augment water storage capacity for a variety of land uses in each watershed, and ultimately increase the number of wild coho salmon.

“The Partnership’s efforts have been greatly enhanced by the involvement of private landowners who have committed to modifying their use of water to keep more flow in the creeks for fish while benefiting from a more stable water supply,” said Kara Heckert, Executive Director of the Sotoyome Resource Conservation District. “We are very excited about the creative and innovative solutions being implemented to address the needs of both fish and people,” added Brittany Heck, Interim Executive Director of the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District.

The multi-disciplinary Partnership includes the Center for Ecosystem Management and Restoration (www.cemar.org), Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (www.goldridgercd.org), Occidental Arts and Ecology Center WATER Institute (www.oaecwater.org), Sotoyome Resource Conservation District (www.sotoyomercd.org), Trout Unlimited (www.tucalifornia.org), University of California Extension in partnership with the California Sea Grant (www.csgc.ucsd.edu), the GIS lab at the University of California’s Hopland Research and Extension Center (http://ucanr.org/sites/Hopland_GIS/), and the Sonoma County Water Agency (www.scwa.ca.gov). The Partnership and landowners with whom it works have also received support from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Natural Resources Conservation Service, State Coastal Conservancy, California Department of Fish and Game, and United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

For more information, please visit: www.cohopartnership.org.