

Russian River curtailments delayed as Lake Mendocino meets target storage level this week

Lake not expected to meet Aug. 1 target

Earlier this summer, the State Water Resources Control Board adopted an emergency regulation authorizing the curtailment of water rights holders in the Russian River watershed “once water levels fall below storage targets in Lake Mendocino or when flows cannot meet demands in the Lower Russian River.”

So far, the water level in Lake Mendocino met both targets for July: 29,315 acre-feet before July 1 and 27,825 acre-feet before July 15, but officials are predicting that it will not meet the target of 26,109 acre-feet before Aug. 1.

In the latest Water Conditions Update prepared by Elizabeth Salomone, general manager of the Russian River Flood Control & Water Conservation Improvement District, she explains that the “SWRCB set Lake Mendocino storage level triggers to enact the Curtailment of Diversions to Protect Water Suppliers and Threatened and Endangered Fish in the Russian River Watershed. If the level drops to 26,109 acre feet on or before August 1st, notices will be mailed out, and projections indicate that is likely.”

Salomone adds that, “currently, all post 1914 water right holders have been noticed to cease diversions due to insufficient water supply and the curtailment is a further action that expands to pre 1914 and riparian right holders.”

In a press release announcing the pending curtailments, Joaquin Esquivel, chair of the SWRCB, is quoted as saying, “Conditions in the Russian River watershed have deteriorated rapidly and are already worse than those experienced during the last drought. The board does not take the restriction of water rights lightly, but the situation we are facing demands our attention and action. Diversions must stop to preserve minimum flows for health and safety once storage levels worsen and curtailments are issued.”

The board describes the curtailments as affecting “2,400 water right holders, including 1,600 water users in the Upper Russian River and up to 800 in the Lower Russian River.” It also describes the Russian River as “starting in Mendocino County and flows south through Sonoma County for 110 miles before entering the Pacific Ocean. Water stored in Lake Mendocino, a reservoir north of Ukiah, is released downstream to maintain flows in the upper section of the river. The supplemental water from the lake protects multiple fish species and municipal and agricultural uses, and during drought, accounts for nearly all the water in the river.”