

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Friends of the Eel River • Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

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PG&E PLANS TO REMOVE EEL RIVER DAMS IN 2028

Draft Surrender and Decommissioning Plan Offers Two Paths to Freeing the Eel - Soon to be California's Longest Free-Flowing River

Eureka, CA – For well over a century, Eel River dams have blocked salmon access to hundreds of miles of cold water habitat in the Upper Eel River watershed, but not for much longer. Today PG&E unveiled their initial draft plan for removing two Eel River dams and surrendering the utility's federal license for the 100 year old Potter Valley Project. One alternative would simply remove Scott and Cape Horn dams; the other, advanced by Sonoma Water, would move forward with a new diversion to the Russian River during the dam removal process.

“Either way you look at it, the Eel River Dams' days are numbered,” remarked Friends of the Eel River Executive Director Alicia Hamann. “We prefer the most straightforward and quickest path to dam removal possible – the fish can't afford any delays.”

The Eel River was once a prolific salmon producing stream with upwards of a million fish returning annually to spawn and provide an abundant food source for Native American Tribes. Later, after the early 1900's in-river canneries closed, the Eel supported a carefully managed ocean commercial fishing economy “These dams helped put a lot of commercial fishermen out of work,” notes fisherwoman Vivian Helliwell. “If we bring back the salmon, we can bring back the local food-producing jobs.”

The Eel River dams are part of the Potter Valley Project (PVP) which diverts Eel River Water through a tunnel to the adjacent Russian River Watershed. However, the PVP no

longer generates power, or profit, for PG&E. The power plant is in disrepair as is Scott Dam and its reservoir, which cannot be filled due to seismic risks, and thus offers little benefit even to water users.

Eel River advocates are excited about PG&E's plans to remove the dams, but they have concerns regarding the alternatives put forth by Sonoma Water et al.. While Sonoma's draft Plan accepts the removal of Scott Dam and Cape Horn Dam, it also vaguely describes the creation of a new governmental entity that would build new diversion infrastructure to maintain an out-of-basin diversion. Sonoma's plan leaves some of the most difficult questions unanswered, such as who will pay how much for diverted Eel River water.

And a number of groups, including the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA), question whether the historical water diversions from one river (the Eel) to an entirely different river (the Russian) should continue to exist, especially if that water is needed for Eel River salmon and steelhead recovery. "All the downstream water users on the Eel River have been deprived of "beneficial use" of the diverted water for 100 years, including "Tribal beneficial use," recreation, domestic, municipal, ranching and farming, and fish and wildlife that rely on plentiful cold water, instead of warm water from the reservoir that promotes predatory pike minnow and toxic algae," PCFFA's Helliwell stated.

Sonoma Water has had plenty of time to put forth a plan to maintain the diversion. "Sonoma Water's Plan looks like a last-ditch effort to delay dam removal while they try to find political support for subsidizing the wine industry. While we will listen to any creative solutions to meet the region's water needs, we will oppose anything that adversely impacts Eel River fisheries or delays dam removal," said Hamann.

Members of the public interested in supporting the most beneficial option for Eel River fish can submit comments to PG&E by December 22. Visit eelriver.org to learn more.

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Editors Notes: To download PG&E's Initial Draft Surrender Application and Conceptual Decommissioning Plan and file comment, go to <https://www.pottervalleysurrenderproceeding.com/> and click on the Documents tab. The Password for downloading the document is "PV_Surrender".

[Background on the Potter Valley Project](#)

The Potter Valley Project consists of two dams, Cape Horn Dam (63 ft tall, constructed in 1908), Scott Dam (138 ft tall, constructed in 1922), and a diversion tunnel that sends water from the Eel to the East Branch of the Russian River. Until 2021, this water was used to generate a small amount of electricity, but when the project transformer failed, PG&E decided not to replace it. So for the past two years the diversion has only served to supplement agriculture along the Russian River. And numerous cutbacks on these water diversions have been found necessary to protect Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed Eel River salmon and steelhead in recent years.

PG&E can no longer completely fill or empty the Lake Pillsbury Reservoir impounded by Scott dam, due to safety and seismic concerns. Scott Dam is rated as a high hazard facility, meaning loss of life is likely in the event of a dam failure. The 100-year-old structure is showing its age. But Scott Dam's most serious problem is that it was built next to the Bartlett Springs fault complex, capable of generating a magnitude 7 earthquake. In Spring 2023, an updated analysis of the seismic risks to Scott Dam convinced both PG&E and the California Division of Safety of Dams the dam could collapse if a quake occurred while it was full.

While the Potter Valley Project is nearing failure as a hydroelectric and irrigation supply system, the Eel River dams are still harming native salmon and steelhead. Numerous studies have confirmed that hundreds of steam miles of coldwater habitat above Scott dam will support multiple species of anadromous fish. Without access to this habitat, our surviving runs of upper basin fish, steelhead especially, don't stand a chance at recovery. Between lethally warm water released from Scott Dam, ideal conditions for invasive and predatory pikeminnow, and the degraded downstream habitat, Eel River fish need the Eel River dams gone as soon as possible.