



Media Release

Worsening drought conditions prompt emergency action in Russian River watershed

State Water Board adopts new regulations to stop diversions

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SACRAMENTO – With water levels at historic lows due to drought, the State Water Resources Control Board today adopted an emergency regulation authorizing the Division of Water Rights to issue curtailment notices to water right holders in the Russian River watershed to safeguard the community’s drinking water availability later this year and next year. Per the regulation, curtailment notices would be issued once water levels fall below storage targets in Lake Mendocino or when flows cannot meet demands in the Lower Russian River.

With the entire Western United States experiencing a second consecutive dry year, California is responding urgently to address acute water supply shortfalls in affected areas, including the Russian River watershed.

“Conditions in the Russian River watershed have deteriorated rapidly and are already worse than those experienced during the last drought,” said Joaquin Esquivel, Chair of the State Water Board. “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.”

If approved by California’s Office of Administrative Law, approximately 2,400 water right holders could be ordered to stop diverting as early as July 5, when water availability is projected to worsen. That includes 1,600 water users in the Upper Russian River and up to 800 in the Lower Russian River.

The Russian River starts 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. As of May 28, Lake Mendocino was at 40% of capacity and Lake Sonoma at 58%, the lowest on record for this date. Under current conditions, continued diversions risk draining the lake completely, threatening the drinking water supply. Projections



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indicate that, without additional rainfall or curtailment of diversions, Lake Mendocino could be completely dry by the end of 2021.

The Russian River watershed (Sonoma and Mendocino counties) was the first to be placed under a regional drought state of emergency by Governor Gavin Newsom on April 21. To address acute drought impacts, the proclamation called on the State Water Board to consider modifying reservoir releases, limiting diversions and curtailing water diversions in the Russian River watershed when needed to protect public health and safety by ensuring the availability of drinking water for these communities. On May 10, the governor added three additional watersheds to the drought emergency, which now encompasses 41 of California's 58 counties

On May 26, the State Water Board sent [letters](#) to 930 water right holders in the Upper Russian River informing them that water is unavailable. At the same time, notices also were mailed to those with more senior water rights, encouraging them to conserve and warning that emergency regulations were being developed that were likely to impact their diversions. Today's regulations enabling the State Water Board's Division of Water Rights to issue curtailment orders are the next step in the implementation of the water rights system to protect health and environment.

The State Water Board website contains additional information on [developments in the Russian River watershed](#) and [drought](#). The Save Our Water [website](#) offers important tips about how to conserve water most effectively, such as fixing leaks indoors and curbing water usage outdoors.

The State Water Board's mission is to preserve, enhance, and restore the quality of California's water resources and drinking water for the protection of the environment, public health, and all beneficial uses, and to ensure proper water resource allocation and efficient use for current and future generations.