


Summary of Findings from Discussions with Tribal Representatives

April 17, 2023

Image credit: Erin Watt

Prepared by

K E A R N S  W E S T

Funding for this project has been provided
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State Department of Water Resources.



I. Background

This Summary of Findings presents the common themes identified from briefings with Tribal representatives in the Russian River and Eel River basins from November 2022 through April 2023. The briefings offered Tribal governments information on the expected decommissioning of the Potter Valley Hydroelectric Project (PVP) and an introduction to the Russian River Water Forum (Water Forum). The briefings were intended to gather input on the proposed Water Forum concept and provide an opportunity for Tribes to share information on their interests in the Potter Valley Project and related water supply, fisheries, and environmental restoration issues. Members of the Water Forum Advisory Team led the briefings with support from Kearns & West.

For more than 100 years, the diversion of water from the Eel River to the Russian River via the PVP has provided an important source of water for the Russian River basin. PG&E plans to decommission the PVP, which could reduce or eliminate this water source.

The Water Forum is a collaborative process initiated by Sonoma Water and a collection of regional partners with funding from the California Department of Water Resources Urban and Multibenefit Drought Relief Program. The Water Forum will seek to identify water supply resiliency solutions that respond to PG&E’s planned decommissioning of the Potter Valley Project while protecting Tribal interests and supporting the stewardship of fisheries, water quality, and recreation in the Russian River and Eel River basins. More broadly, the Water Forum will support ongoing regional collaboration on water supply and watershed restoration issues in the Russian River and Eel River basins. Updated information on the Water Forum is available at russianriverwaterforum.org.

This document summarizes views on the Water Forum process and water and fisheries issues in the Russian River and Eel River basins shared by Tribal representatives during the briefings. Comments provided during the briefings have been aggregated to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

“The rivers are significant; they are woven into our existence.”

— Briefing participant

The findings presented below are intended solely to reflect input provided by participants. They will inform the design of the Water Forum process and help Tribes and other Water Forum participants understand the range of Tribal interests associated with the decommissioning of the Potter Valley Project and related water and fisheries issues.

II. Methodology

Kearns & West coordinated and supported eight individual briefings with Tribes and one meeting with the Mendocino, Lake, Sonoma Tribal Environmental Professionals (MLSTEP) group. See **Appendix A** for details. Outreach was initiated through a government-to-government invitation. The invitation letter (see **Appendix B**) offered Tribal leaders or their designated representatives a discussion on the Russian River Water Forum process.

Each briefing consisted of a presentation with information on the Potter Valley Project and its decommissioning, along with context on the formation of the Russian River Water Forum, followed by an open dialogue.

The briefings had the following objectives:

- Understand Tribes' water resource interests and priorities;
- Understand Tribes' connection to the Potter Valley Project and the potential impacts of the decommissioning;
- Gather recommendations for effective and inclusive Tribal participation in the Water Forum; and
- Gather input on the proposed Water Forum concept and structure

Tribal representatives participating in the briefings included Tribal Council members, environmental experts, cultural specialists, and tribal administrators. The briefings were attended by representatives of the Water Forum Advisory Team,, including staff from Sonoma Water, Sonoma County, the Mendocino Inland Water & Power Commission, and the Russian River Flood Control & Water Conservation Improvement District.

III. Overarching Findings

- **Support for the Water Forum Concept** – Tribal representatives understand the need for the Water Forum – to address both the PVP diversion and broader water Russian River resiliency topics. They emphasized that Tribes have a range of interests and perspectives regarding the PVP diversions and recognize the value of having a forum for discussion. Some cited the North Coast Resource Partnership as a successful example to learn from. One participant noted that Tribal members had initiated internal conversations about developing a trusted group of local organizations to address watershed concerns related to the Potter Valley Project but found it difficult to convene multiple interests.
- **Inclusivity** – All Tribes in the Eel and Russian river basins should be invited to participate in the Water Forum Process. Tribes have an interest in understanding the interests of the other Tribes in the region and how they are responding to the Potter Valley Project decommissioning. Each Tribe's interests are unique; Tribes cannot presume to speak on behalf of one another.
- **Cultural Significance** – The Russian River and Eel River watersheds are used for cultural practices in each season. Watershed issues impact the cultural practices of tribes. Cultural specialists emphasized the need for healthy waterways as sacred spaces for prayer and offerings.

- **Respect for Tribal Knowledge and Expertise** – Tribes have observed and studied ecosystems for centuries. They have valuable understandings of biology and fishery needs that Western science may not consider. They understand that technical expertise is needed within the Water Forum structure and would like Tribal experts to be involved in those conversations and studies.
- **Acknowledgment of Previous Harms** – There is a history of damage to Tribal communities in the Russian River and Eel River basins. This needs to be acknowledged.
- **Capacity** – Tribes are often asked for extensive input on contentious issues but can be stretched thin. Tribes want to be involved in these important conversations and, if possible, compensated for their time and knowledge. Tribal representatives recommended tapping into existing partnerships where Tribes have been involved.
- **Fisheries Recovery** – Fisheries recovery is a high priority for many Tribes. The species are ingrained in Tribal cultures, and all Tribes spoke to the importance of improving the health of both the Eel River and Russian River. Many Tribes expressed a watershed-wide perspective on fisheries issues, citing issues that need to be addressed from creek to river. They recognize that Tribes hold a range of opinions about removal of Scott Dam and the continuation of the Potter Valley Project diversions and related impacts on fisheries. In general, Tribes expressed an interest in pursuing solutions that result in healthy rivers for everyone.

IV. Interests Related to Water Supply and Fisheries

- **Water Supply** – Some Tribes depend on water supplies from the Potter Valley Project and expect to be impacted if diversions from the Eel River are reduced or eliminated. Reductions in surface water supplies can increase groundwater pumping, which concerns some Tribes dependent on wells for water supply.
- **Equity** – Several Tribes shared that past water planning processes have tended to favor influential municipal and agricultural water users, leading to outcomes that the Tribes feel are inequitable. Tribes shared that they have felt marginalized in these discussions.
- **Watershed Planning and Management** – Tribes cited a need for a management and stewardship process for areas along the Russian River and Eel River in the form of a watershed plan. Several Tribes proposed that the plan be administered formally by Tribal governments; one participant cited the example of the recent watershed management agreement in Oregon between the Coquille Indian Tribe and the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.
- **Illegal Diversions** – Unregulated diversions of water, in particular for cannabis cultivation, are a concern in the Eel River basin.

Appendix A: List of Tribes Contacted

Table 1: List of Tribes and Tribal groups that participated in a briefing.

Tribe	Name & Title	Basin	Briefing Date
Bear River Band of the Rohnerville Rancheria	Derek Bowman, <i>Environmental Director</i> Gusto Bowie, <i>Cultural Liaison and Tribal Council</i>	Eel River	3/01/2023
Graton Rancheria	Buffy McQuillen, <i>Tribal Heritage Preservation Officer</i> Hector Garcia Cabrales, <i>Culture Resource Specialist</i> Maureen Geary, <i>General Counsel</i>	Russian River	11/16/2022
Kashia Band of Pomo Indians	Nina Hapner, <i>Director of Environmental Planning</i>	Russian River	11/7/2022
Lytton Band of Pomo Indians	Andy Mejia, <i>Chairman</i> Brenda Tomaras, <i>General Counsel</i> Lytton Rancheria Tribal Council	Russian River	3/29/2023
Mendocino, Lake, Sonoma Tribal Environmental Professionals (MLSTEP)	Gregg Young, <i>Potter Valley Tribe</i> Terri McCartney, <i>Pinoleville Pomo Nation</i> Tyrone Earl Mitchell, <i>Hopland Band of Pomo Indians</i> Brenda Tomaras, <i>Lytton Band of Pomo Indians</i> Dakota Perez, <i>Pinoleville Pomo Nation</i> Meyo Marrufo, <i>Robinson Rancheria Band of Pomo Indians</i> Nina Stewart, <i>Kashia Band of Pomo Indians</i>	Russian River	1/11/2023
Pinoleville Pomo Nation	Leona Williams, <i>Chairperson</i> Angela James, <i>Vice Chairperson</i> Terri McCartney, <i>Environmental Director</i>	Russian River	4/03/2023
Potter Valley Tribe	Gregg Young, <i>Environmental Director</i>	Russian River and Eel River	2/13/2023
Redwood Valley Little River Band of Pomo Indians (Redwood Valley Rancheria)	Gayle Zepeda, <i>Tribal Council member</i> Mary Camp, <i>Tribal Council member</i> Matthew Smith, <i>Environmental Director</i>	Russian River	12/9/2023
Round Valley Indian Tribes	Wyatt Smith, <i>Eel River Fisheries Program Coordinator & Biologist</i>	Eel River	1/12/2023

Table 2: List of Tribes that were invited to a briefing and have not yet participated.

Tribe	Basin
Cloverdale Rancheria	Russian River
Coyote Valley Band of Pomo Indians	Russian River
Dry Creek Rancheria	Russian River
Guidiville Indian Rancheria	Russian River
Hopland Band of Pomo Indians	Russian River
Wiyot Tribe	Eel River



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Appendix B – Letter from Grant Davis via Chair to Tribal Representatives



**Sonoma
Water**

DATE

Dear [insert name of Chairperson]

I am writing on behalf of the Sonoma County Water Agency to share information on the new Russian River Water Forum process and to extend an invitation to a briefing regarding the future of water diversions from the Eel River to the Russian River via the Potter Valley Hydroelectric Project and water supply resiliency in the Russian River watershed more generally.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co., which owns and operates the Potter Valley Project, plans to decommission the project, ending the diversions that typically provide 30,000 to 65,000 acre-feet of water to the Russian River watershed annually. However, a new operator, such as a regional entity representing water interests in the Russian River watershed, could potentially assume responsibility for the project and continue water diversions.

With funding from a California Department of Water Resources grant, Sonoma Water and a collection of regional partners are initiating a collaborative process – the Russian River Water Forum – that aims to identify a path forward to continue Potter Valley Project water diversions while also fostering collaboration to support water supply resiliency in the Russian River watershed. This effort is new and distinct from other recent initiatives on the Potter Valley Project – such as the Two-Basin Solution Partnership and the Ad hoc process convened by Rep. Jared Huffman – though it involves some of the same participants.

We are eager to learn more about your tribal government's perspective on these issues, and to discuss the Russian River Water Forum process with you, or your designated representative.

As a first step, I would like to offer you or your representative a briefing with regional water agency leadership including Sonoma Water and Russian River Water Forum Advisory Team members. If you would like to participate, please contact Marissa Montenegro, Intergovernmental Affairs Manager at Marissa.montenegro@sonoma-county.org or 707-565-3771 by October 21, 2022 and we will follow up to schedule the discussion.

Thank you for taking the time to consider engaging in the Russian River Water Forum process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "G. Davis".

Grant Davis
General Manager

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