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“MENDOCINO COUNTY WATER RESILIENCY TASK FORCE” TAKES PROACTIVE STEPS TO SECURE WATER SUPPLY FOR UKIAH AND REDWOOD VALLEY IN ADVANCE OF POTENTIAL STATE WATER BOARD ACTIONS

Ukiah, CA. March 16, 2021. – Leaders in the Mendocino County Water Resiliency Task Force have engaged with the State Water Resources Control Board to address the growing drought conditions in the Upper Russian River. Work is being done by Task Force members to identify the risks of water supply cutbacks, including possible State Water Board restrictions, and to craft solutions that will most effectively utilize the limited water resources forecast for 2021. Task Force members include the City of Ukiah, Russian River Flood Control & Water Conservation Improvement District, Mendocino County Farm Bureau, Upper Russian River Water Agency, Resource Conservation District, County Water Agency, and others.

In response to low water supplies, the State Water Board can take action to impose restrictions on water rights holders. The State Water Board staff has indicated that without a significant and immediate increase in rain resulting in substantial improvement of storage levels in the local reservoirs, they may need to take action this spring to protect water rights and other beneficial uses such as ensuring adequate flows for salmon.

The State Water Board is open to considering voluntary conservation plans developed collaboratively with water rights holders in a watershed. Participants in the program can use their expertise in a complex watershed system to develop a proactive and voluntary plan that ensures efficiency of use and reduces diversions to meet an overall agreed upon conservation target. The State Water Board is encouraging Russian River water leaders to take this direction, with the aim of avoiding future regulatory actions.

“The Task Force invites water rights holders in the Upper Russian River to consider participating in development of a voluntary conservation program that may help protect their water rights from complete curtailment,” said Elizabeth Salomone, General Manager for the Russian River Flood Control & Water Improvement District, and lead for the Task Force. “We have the opportunity here to work collectively to manage our current water supply the way that works best for this region, rather than waiting for the State Water Board to step in and do it for us.”

The Task Force plans to hold a workshop to facilitate this discussion. Workshop details will be announced soon and interested parties are encouraged to reach out to the Task Force for more information.

“The reality is the State Water Board has sweeping powers to protect water rights, promote beneficial uses, and manage public trust resources,” stated Phil Williams, a water lawyer in Ukiah who is working with the Task Force. “Many of our neighbors have first-hand experience with the near-overwhelming power of the State when it comes to water. But there is a better way where we can have a say in how local resources are managed, and the State would likely welcome an amicable solution that works for everyone. Though it may be a hard pill to swallow, it’s far better than the alternative we are very likely facing.”

“The Task Force believes that the path to a bright future for the Upper Russian River includes a secure water supply for all of us. Water is truly at the essence of our community and every effort must be made to ensure a secure, reliable supply,” said Mendocino County Supervisor Glenn McGourty. “Every drop of water that can be protected in the Upper Russian River is a net gain for all of us.”

For more information on the Water Resiliency Task Force, contact Devon Jones at Mendocino County Farm Bureau (director@mendofb.org), Elizabeth Salomone at Russian River Flood Control (districtmanager@rrfc.net), or Sean White at the City of Ukiah (swhite@cityofukiah.com).