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CITY OF UKIAH CRITICIZES FERC AND PG&E RESTRICTIONS THAT CREATE AN UNNECESSARY, ADMINISTRATIVELY-MANUFACTURED DROUGHT, DESPITE NORMAL WATER YEAR CONDITIONS

Ukiah, CA. August 9, 2024. – The City of Ukiah is taking action over impacts to the Upper Russian River, including environmental and economic harm to the region, caused by PG&E dramatically reducing flows to the Russian River from the Potter Valley Project. In a formal “Request for Rehearing” filed July 29th, the City again underscored how the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission’s (FERC) approval for PG&E’s reduction in water flows was made without fairly or adequately considering the harmful impacts to the Upper Russian River.

For 120 years, abandoned flows diverted from the Eel through the Potter Valley Project have been the foundation for progress in the Upper Russian River. But in the past few years PG&E has made yearly requests for a “variance” to reduce these flows. This year PG&E requested to reduce flows to the East Branch Russian River to match the dry water year minimum flow requirement of 25 cfs, with the “flexibility” to drop all the way down to 5 cfs. FERC granted the request.

FERC approved the request, despite the fact that this 2024 water-year is on track for a normal water-year. Eight days after FERC’s approval, PG&E immediately dropped flows all the way down to the extremely restricted 5 cfs level – as if we were in a dry or critical water year.

“Water is being diverted into the Russian River as if we were in a serious drought year, despite the fact that both water basins are clearly in at least normal conditions,” said Mari Rodin, City Council Member for the City of Ukiah. “This dramatic reduction risks creating a manufactured drought for our entire region reminiscent of the real drought in 2021, all without analyzing the impacts to our ecology, economy, and community. They dismissed our interests and took away our region’s water. It’s untenable.”

The National Environmental Policy Act requires federal agencies to carefully review the impacts of a proposed federal action on the human environment. But FERC’s Order did not include such an analysis, instead referencing a 24 year-old environmental impact statement (EIS) that is outdated and incomplete. FERC did not meaningfully discuss or consider how its approval would impact water users dependent on the Russian River and abandoned PVP flows, Ukiah’s ability to generate clean electricity through its hydropower facility, or endangered salmonids in the Russian River.

The City's Request for Rehearing asked FERC to comply with NEPA and conduct a new or supplemental analysis of the impacts to the Upper Russian River from reduced imports of PVP water. While this analysis is conducted, and acknowledging the interests of the Eel River, the City has only asked that in the meantime PG&E be allowed to reduce flows to no lower than 25 cfs, rather than down to 5 cfs.

Following the Order, Sonoma Water notified the State Water Resources Control Board that FERC's Order means that Lake Mendocino storage would be about 12,000 acre-feet lower by the end of this water year than it would be without the Order. This may have major impacts to the entire Upper Russian River – despite the second consecutive year of healthy rainfall.

"We recognize and acknowledge the needs our neighbors on the Eel have, but our needs must be recognized as well," said Glenn McGourty, Mendocino County Supervisor. "There is so much at stake for our community in the greater Ukiah Valley, and yet a thoughtful consideration of our interests is entirely lacking in PG&E's request and in FERC's decision. It's as if we don't matter to them."

"The fish and habitat in the Russian River deserve protection too," said Sean White, a fisheries biologist who filed a successful lawsuit against the Army Corps of Engineers and National Marine Fisheries Service for failure to protect endangered salmon below Coyote Valley Dam. "There is a pattern – a systemic, institutionalized pattern by federal agencies – of disregarding the interests of the Upper Russian River. It is time for our community to say, 'Enough – we are done being ignored.' "

"Our farms and businesses will suffer from the acceptance of this dramatic and unnecessary reduction," said Jazzmynn Randall, Executive Director of the Mendocino Farm Bureau. "We have worked hard to survive during dry years while waiting for the rains to return, but now in a good water year we are facing a manufactured drought that creates a standard that will harm agricultural output and cause long term economic damage."

The City of Ukiah's Request to FERC observes "The entire focus [of FERC's analysis] is on the Eel at the expense of the Russian.... To be clear, we ask for nothing more than that our interests be given equal weight to others' and that the impacts to our community: our families, our schools, our businesses, our orchards and vineyards, our listed species, and our environment, simply be identified and analyzed in accordance with the mandates of the National Environmental Policy Act."

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