

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON CURRENT HABITAT ISSUES

California Water Conditions

The Habitat Committee (HC) received a briefing on current California drought conditions from its California members. California is still in a drought and reservoirs are at critically low levels, between 20 and 35 percent of capacity. The probability of an El Niño event occurring this year has dropped to 58 percent, and if it does occur, will likely be weaker than previously anticipated, with lower rainfall.

The HC discussed flow conditions in the Klamath and Trinity Rivers. Due to dire conditions in the spring, the Council wrote a letter on July 10 urging the Department of the Interior (DOI) to augment the expected low summer flows.

At the end of July, DOI stated that supplemental flows would be released only if warranted by the outbreak of disease. In response, the Hoopa Tribe spoke with DOI Secretary Sally Jewel to urge proactive augmentation to avoid such outbreaks. On August 22, DOI reassessed the situation and ordered proactive releases from the Trinity Reservoir beginning the next day. A temporary restraining order, filed by San Joaquin water users, to stop the releases was denied on August 27, allowing the releases to continue.

Despite these releases, the disease triggers were exceeded, and DOI made emergency releases of 3400 cfs of water beginning on September 16 that doubled the flow of the Klamath River. These flows continued for one week. Although a gill disease was observed in Chinook salmon, the combined releases appear to have successfully avoided a major fish kill.

On October 24th, the Courts ruled on 2013 litigation that supplemental Trinity flows to benefit fall Chinook salmon in the lower Klamath were not allowed under the Central Valley Project. The Hoopa Valley Tribe is planning to appeal that ruling and Interior is assessing whether it will appeal the District Court ruling.

In addition, California Proposition 1, which provides funding for new water storage options, improved water quality, and restoration of wetlands, passed last week.

New Techniques in Mapping Fish Abundance

Jim Thorson from the National Marine Fisheries Service Northwest Science Fisheries Center discussed the development of three new techniques in mapping fish abundance through the application of geostatistical analyses, including habitat variation. The goals of these analyses are to better integrate survey information into stock assessments and are expected to improve precision in predictions of groundfish abundance.

In general, the HC supports further development of these models to answer habitat-related questions. These tools could help identify and describe essential fish habitat beyond presence/absence descriptions.

California Desalination Policy

The HC heard a presentation from Mariela de la Paz of the California State Water Resource Control Board on California's Ocean Plan Desalination Amendment. New regulations are proposed to

clarify existing water quality codes for desalination of seawater, and the primary goal of the amendment is to provide a consistent statewide approach that minimizes harm to biological resources. These include impingement, entrainment, alterations to water quality at the discharge site, and degradation of fish habitat.

The proposed amendment includes provisions for new and expanded facilities, and includes preliminary provisions for monitoring impacts to marine life and mitigation through habitat restoration or fees. The Water Board does not consider economic costs, including energy use which would be handled by the Utilities Commission. The Board is currently responding to stakeholder comments (the comment period has closed), with a final draft of the amendment expected by winter 2015. Should the amendment be greatly modified, another comment period is likely and may be an opportunity for the Council to provide input. Additional regulations are being crafted for desalination plants in estuaries, and the Council may be able to take a more proactive role in shaping policy for these habitat areas of particular concern.

Ocean Energy Update

Donna Schroeder of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) spoke to the HC about two environmental studies related to electromagnetic field (EMF) emissions from offshore energy project cables and their effects on marine species. Dr. Schroeder is a fisheries biologist at BOEM and also conducts BOEM's National Environmental Policy Act analyses.

BOEM recently conducted studies on EMF emissions effects on marine species at two sites in California. In one study, they compared the response of fish and invertebrates at various distances from energized and non-energized cables at offshore oil platforms. Preliminary results were mixed, and additional analyses are being conducted.

The HC believes that these types of analyses may inform future projects such as the Principle Power Wind Float Project off Coos Bay, and site-specific studies will be necessary.

As a side note, U.S. Geological Survey recently completed seafloor mapping at the lease blocks off Coos Bay and discovered methane seeps in the lower southeast corner of the lease area, indicating possible geologic features there. They also confirmed that rocky ridges of concern to fishermen are to the south of the lease area.

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