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Why is So Much Water Being Released From Lake Mendocino?

By [Justine Frederiksen](#),

As is required by state law, the releases from Lake Mendocino have been increased. Just in the past week, those releases have amounted to a loss of 800 acre feet of water, or more than 260 million gallons.

“The minimum flows are dictated by Decision 1610, which was written in 1986,” said Sean White, executive director of the Russian River Flood Control and Water Conservation Improvement District.

Since it was written so long ago, White said, “many of the things it was predicated on no longer apply,” such as the fact that the amount of required flow in the Russian River, which now needs to measure 150 cfs at the first gauge in Talmage, is based on whether our area is considered to be in a “normal, dry or critically dry year.”

“Our weather year is derived from the amount of water in Lake Pillsbury, which has nothing to do with the amount of water stored in Lake Mendocino,” said White, adding that when Decision 1610 was written, much more water flowed from Lake Pillsbury to Lake Mendocino through the Potter Valley Project.

So even though the entire state is suffering from a prolonged drought, the official determination for the weather year thus far is “normal,” because of the amount of water in Lake Pillsbury.

Therefore, the Sonoma County Water Agency, which is currently in charge of releases from Lake Mendocino, is releasing more than 120 cfs to meet the minimum flow requirements.

Though often blamed for the releases, the Army Corps of Engineers has not been in charge of releasing water from the lake since December of 2012, because there has not been enough water since then to trigger its role, which is flood control.

“It used to make sense to use the amount of water in Lake Pillsbury (to judge the weather year), but since 2006, the flows from Lake Pillsbury to Lake Mendocino have really been reduced, so it doesn’t make sense anymore,” said Ann DuBay, spokeswoman for the Sonoma County Water Agency, who said her agency began work on a petition to permanently change Decision 1610 several years ago, but still needs to complete the Environmental Impact Report before filing it with the State Water Resources Control Board.

In the meantime, DuBay said the agency has been filing “Temporary Urgency Change Order Petitions” to reduce the required flows and preserve water in Lake Mendocino every year since 2009.

“This year we will most likely file a petition again,” she said, adding that her agency is still “optimistic” that more spring rain will come.

“We totally understand people’s concerns (about the releases). No one wants Lake Mendocino to get as low as it did last year, so we’re watching it very carefully, and we will definitely be taking action as soon as we have more information.”

Since it takes a couple of weeks to prepare a petition, DuBay said her agency will likely be making a determination “soon,” possibly within the next few weeks.

The last urgency change petition expired on Feb. 20, meaning the releases from Lake Mendocino quickly quadrupled.

And while White said the recent rains certainly helped improve “soil moisture, it wasn’t enough to generate any significant runoff. We need another good couple of inches, or we need a change petition. Or we need both!”

About the Author

Justine Frederiksen is the UDJ’s senior writer. An experienced reporter, she covers the City of Ukiah including the police and fire beat, as well as education, environment, water and much more. Reach the author at udjif@ukiahdj.com or follow Justine on Twitter: [@JustFrederiksen](https://twitter.com/JustFrederiksen).