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More Water in Russian River, Less in Lake Mendocino



A swing hangs from a tree at a popular swimming hole on the Russian River at Riverside Park.

By JUSTINE FREDERIKSEN

Since the releases from Coyote Valley Dam were increased this month, Lake Mendocino has lost about 200 acre-feet of water a day, according to daily lake level reports.

"We're going to see a reservoir as low as we've ever seen it in the fall," said Sean White, general manager of the Russian River Flood Control District, addressing the Ukiah City Council last week as it discussed this year's drought. "We were gaining (storage) in May because we had inflows from Potter Valley and minimal outflows, but you're going to see that relationship change as outflows outstrip inflow."

On June 4, Lake Mendocino was reported to have 50,612 acre-feet of water, a level that Ukiah Public Works Director Tim Eriksen told the council is lower than what the lake had at this time during the drought five years ago.

"In 2009, our last horrible drought, this one being worse, we were at 57,000 acre feet," Eriksen said. "Sonoma County (Water Agency) is opening up the floodgates so to speak and dumping about 100 cubic feet per second (cfs) through the dam, so we're going down now."

According to the numbers provided by AccuWeather, Lake Mendocino had 51,051 acre-feet on June 1, and by June 12, it had 49,244. That is a reduction of 1,807 acre-feet in less than two weeks, or about 200 acre-feet a day.

White told the council that the much-needed spring rains filled in the lake enough to trigger an increase in flows.

"Because we got that rain, we got inflow from Potter Valley, and it put us over 50,000 acre feet on June 1, which put us in a dry criteria (rather than critically dry) which I think is ludicrous," he said. "So the minimum flows went from a minimum of 25 cfs in May, to 75 cfs for the remainder of the summer."

Ann DuBay of the Sonoma County Water Agency said the State Water Resources Board dictates what the minimum flows should be in the Upper Russian River, and that enough water needs to be released at Lake Mendocino so that river gauges in Hopland and Healdsburg read 75 cfs.

White also noticed that the turbidity, or cloudiness, of the water in the river had increased significantly since the flows from the lake were increased, particularly north of Hopland.

"As it has been over the last several years, whenever releases (from the lake) become the dominant flow, water quality (turbidity specifically) becomes significantly impaired," White wrote in an e-mail that included photos he took of the river in several spots. "(During) the low flows, the main stem was small, but green, clear and beautiful. Since the mandated increase in flow it is dirty and turbid all the way to the (Highway) 101 bridge in Hopland."

DuBay said she had not noticed the cloudiness in the river once it reached Sonoma County, and that the turbidity was caused by sediment in the water.

"Lake Mendocino has a lot of gravel and sediment from the hills that drain into the watershed," she said, adding that SCWA engineer Don Seymour said having sediment in the water released from the lake this time of year was normal.

DuBay said the current releases from Lake Mendocino will continue throughout the summer, and will likely be increased in the fall.

"In the fall, we generally release more water to help the Chinook go upstream," she said, explaining that those releases will start when Chinook are seen in the river. "The goal is to preserve 20,000 acre-feet in the lake so we have enough water for when the Chinook start."

DuBay said last fall, the flows were not increased for the Chinook migration because there wasn't enough water in the lake to do so, but staff monitoring the river determined that "the fish weren't having a problem with the lower flows, and there were plenty of them migrating.

"If there's a ton of water in the lake, then we may release more," she said.

DuBay said there is not a corresponding lake level that would trigger the condition to automatically return to "critically dry," but if "there was concern about the reservoirs dropping a lot more rapidly than we anticipated, then we would ask the state water board to consider reducing the flows."

She said the release Thursday was 136 cfs, and the daily average was 131 cfs. She said the releases depend on a variety of factors, including how much water it is believed that people or vegetation will be using.

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