

Scott River Watershed's Agricultural Wells Curtailed by State Water Board

--Local alliance warns of precedent for all wells in California

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Siskiyou County, CA—Family farmers and ranchers in Scott Valley, far-northern California, were forced to turn off their irrigation pumps on Thursday, July 14, due to emergency drought regulations imposed by the State Water Resources Control Board. A local grassroots communication group, Scott Valley Agriculture Water Alliance (AgWA), is warning farmers and ranchers across the state of the precedent-setting nature of this legal action that could affect all agricultural well users in other regions of the state.

“The only other time we’ve seen the Water Board shut down ag wells was right here in Siskiyou County last September, under the same emergency regulations,” says Theodora Johnson, spokesman for AgWA. “Nowhere else in the state is the Board going after groundwater users. We think it’s highly unreasonable that it’s only happening here near the Scott River, where our fish populations are relatively stable and our aquifer is not over-drafted. Truly ‘voluntary solutions’, such as one in the Russian River basin, were never offered to us. It seems as though our small, multi-generational family farms and ranches are being targeted only because we don’t have any political sway.”

Last month, the Water Board re-adopted emergency drought regulations that maintained mandatory “emergency” minimum flow levels for the Scott River, a tributary of the Klamath River. The original regulation and flow requirements went into effect in September 2021. If the mandatory monthly flow levels are not met each day, irrigation curtailments are triggered. AgWA asserts these flow levels are unattainable in a drought year such as this, and have not been proven to be essential for the survival of coho salmon, Chinook salmon, and steelhead trout--the fish species cited by the Water Board, based upon the recommendation of the California Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, as needing protection in this drought,

While some producers in Scott Valley have agreed to cut back their well water usage by 30 percent to avoid total loss of all their irrigation water, many have not qualified or have not asked to be part of a 30-percent reduction agreement. According to estimates of the Water Board, about half of the 32,000 irrigated acres in Scott Valley—is not covered under such agreements t this year. Irrigation supports pasture, alfalfa, and grain production. Today’s curtailment shuts off 100 percent of their irrigation water, under threat of \$500-per-day fines. Certain exemptions are allowed for minimal livestock watering, small water users, and health and safety needs.

Lauren Sweezey, a co-founder of AgWA and Scott Valley hay farmer who owns river property, said the Scott River characteristically runs low or goes underground in very hot, dry years, with documented examples dating back to the mid-1800s. Unlike much of California, no water storage reservoirs exist in the watershed and no water is imported.

“There’s little evidence these curtailments will result in the flows demanded by the State,” Swezey says. “Scott River supports the water supply in this small mountain valley and it is mostly snow-melt fed. When the snowpack is gone, the river flow rapidly diminishes. Last year, even after all diversions and pumps were turned off on Sept. 10, we didn’t see flows come up again until we had a good rain in late October.”

The Water Board appears to be basing its legal authority to regulate groundwater on the presumption of “connectivity” between surface and groundwater. “But,” Swezey notes, “if they’re going to make that assertion, they should monitor very closely the effects of their curtailments to prove their theory.”

Unlike many other farming areas of California, Swezey points out that producers in Scott Valley are not being offered compensation by the government for the loss of their water during much of their growing season.

“The burden of proof with this curtailment regulation is on the farmer to show he’s not harming fish by irrigating,” says Sari Sommarstrom, a retired local watershed consultant and co-founder of AgWA. “It’s true we’ve been in a 20-year drought, and that’s taxing on everything and everyone that depends on water to survive. However, our coho salmon populations have been extremely resilient, and have even been increasing over the past 20 years—thanks in large part to local conservation actions we’ve taken.”

As for fall-run Chinook salmon, Sommarstrom says populations have seen a downturn in the past few years due to lack of timely fall precipitation during spawning season..

“We know the fall run Chinook are a commercially important fish to the tribes and to coastal fishermen, and that harvest has been severely reduced or denied again this year,” says Sommarstrom. “Our heart goes out to the tribal fishing communities and the multiple challenges affecting both the natural and hatchery salmon runs in the Klamath River. But trying to make up the difference by punishing our Scott Valley farmers and ranchers is not the answer. Obtaining the Scott River’s long-term average of about 5,000 Chinook adults would not make up for the much larger fish deficit of about 15,000 natural run salmon that prevented harvest this year.”

Back in the 1990’s, Sommarstrom led a community effort to protect and improve the Chinook salmon run in Scott Valley. However, when coho salmon in this region became federally listed as “threatened” in 1997, followed by the state listing in 2005 , “almost all of the habitat restoration focus shifted to coho,” she recalls. “Now, we see coho are doing very well here, while Chinook still need our help during their fall spawning migration in these drought years. But we need balance. Yes, there are ways we can help Chinook in the Scott, just like we did for the coho. But we can do it in a way that doesn’t put local producers out of business.

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Scott Valley Agriculture Water Alliance (AgWA) is a unified voice communicating on behalf of local farmers and ranchers, spreading accurate information about Scott Valley’s ag producers, the Scott River watershed, and its fish.