



*An endangered Chinook salmon in the Eel River, one of California's least altered watersheds. Scientists say it could serve as a stronghold where fish can maintain populations while degraded habitat is restored. **Mike Wier** Cal Trout*

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The Eel River could save wild salmon – if we can save the river itself

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE
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The Eel River is on the brink of disaster, its ocean-going fish species threatened with extinction, its nurturing estuary diked, drained and diminishing.

At the same time, this massive watershed in California's northwest corner offers the state's best hope of ensuring a future abundance of wild anadromous fish.

This paradox of the Eel, California's third largest river system, is driving an urgency to save it while there's still time. For the Eel's diverse and often adversarial stakeholders, this is a rare and fleeting opportunity to set aside differences out of a common commitment to what they share.

Ironically, the vehicle for potential collaboration is a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission re-licensing process launched in April.

High in the Eel's headlong rush to the Pacific is the Potter Valley Powerhouse, a 9.2 megawatt hydropower project owned and operated by Pacific Gas and Electric Co. Built in 1908, the project includes a series of tunnels and penstocks, two dams and two reservoirs.

A ladder allows some fish to get to spawning grounds above Cape Horn Dam – a meager 40 adult steelhead this year. But Scott Dam blocks all access to spawning habitat. The million fish the Eel historically produced in a good year have [plummeted by roughly 99 percent](#).

These inaccessible spawning grounds are critical to the survival of steelhead, Chinook and coho salmon. Rather than waging an all-out battle to remove the dams, fish advocates believe the best hope for the species' future is to promote sound science and innovative thinking.

Scientists already know the tributaries above Scott Dam offer 288 miles of habitat for steelhead and 90 miles for Chinook, said Darren Mierau, California Trout's north coast director. The challenge is to find ways to improve flow management and fish passage.

[Cal Trout](#) is counting on the involvement of local landowners and agencies, a process already started through a task force Mierau organized. But the sheer size of the 3,600 square-mile watershed, combined with the magnitude of the damage caused by a century of logging, mining and diking, present the coalition with a Herculean task.

Prodding the process is [PG&E's FERC license](#), which expires in April 2022. Company officials also view re-licensing as an opportunity for stakeholders to convene, share data and develop new information, said Dave Moller, a director in PG&E's power generation department.

The stakes for the would-be colleagues are higher than fish counts and stream flows, and the Potter Valley project is not the only barrier threatening survival of the Eel's native species. Thanks to a complicated scheme innovative for its time, water from the Eel is diverted to eastern Mendocino and Sonoma counties, where it supports a \$34 million agricultural industry and supplies over 600,000 municipal water users. The 21 percent annual flow diverted from the Eel after PG&E's diversions is further siphoned off by illegal marijuana gardens.

If the Eel's native fish wink out they will take with them the lush, dynamic redwood forests that shade the banks of the river. "If we don't have the fish, we won't have these magnificent forests," said Scott Greacen, executive director of Friends of the Eel River.

Looming over these threats is a changing climate that promises warmer river waters at critical times when fish most need cold water.

Despite the bleak odds, [scientists cite the Eel](#) as one of California's least altered watersheds – a place with the potential to serve as a salmon stronghold where fish can maintain populations while degraded habitat is restored. And although FERC re-licensing is not always a process that solves environmental problems, it has stimulated several recent landmark settlement agreements.

The Eel is still wild – still capable of providing the shrink and swell of a healthy estuary, the unfettered access to cold waters and upstream spawning gravel. To save it advocates and agencies alike must act fast. Their opportunity is as elusive as a run of a million salmon.

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