

Santa Cruz Water Rights Project

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Frequently Asked Questions

What are water rights?

Water rights provide legal permission, terms, and conditions for use of water from a stream, lake, or irrigation canal. In California, water rights are overseen by the State of California Water Resources Control Board.

What is the Santa Cruz Water Rights Project?

The project would modify the City's existing water rights to provide more flexibility in the way the City manages its existing supplies. As part of these changes, requirements would be added for downstream flows to better protect threatened and endangered fish that live in local watersheds. The project also considers future augmentation of water supply including aquifer storage and recovery facilities, water transfers and exchanges with neighboring water agencies, as well as improvements to existing diversion infrastructure.

What problems do changing Santa Cruz's water rights solve?

Water rights dictate where and how water can be used. Santa Cruz's current water rights were established many decades ago, when water supply was more reliable, and when coho salmon and steelhead trout were abundant in local watersheds. Since then water shortages have become frequent, and coho and steelhead are struggling to survive. The goal in changing Santa Cruz's water rights is to provide more flexibility in the ways that the city's water supply can be used to help improve water supply reliability and to support protection and restoration of important fishery resources.

Will SC get more water from changing their water rights?

No. The changes that the City of Santa Cruz is asking the state to make to its water rights simply change where, and the ways in which, the city's water can be used. For example, right now Santa Cruz's water rights restrict the City from sharing water from the San

Lorenzo River with the Soquel Creek Water District, or storing excess winter water in aquifers outside the city. Both of these examples would be important approaches to improving future reliability of the City's water supplies.

Will the changes allow Santa Cruz to take water from new areas?

No. The city's water sources will remain exactly as they have been. The changes would simply allow the city to be more flexible with the water that it currently has rights to use.

What are the benefits of the project?

By expanding the area where the city can use its water, the city can pursue two elements to assist with future water supply reliability: storing excess winter water in underground aquifers (aquifer storage and recovery - ASR), and sharing and transferring water between water districts. Both of these elements were recommended by the citizen-led Water Supply Advisory Committee (WSAC) and approved by the City Council, and both elements rely on the ability to store and transfer water to areas beyond the boundaries allowed by current water rights.

Endangered and threatened fish species also benefit because the new rights will include a commitment to ongoing sharing of water to improve fish habitat. Many utilities relying on surface water as a source take all the water that their early 20th century water rights allow them to. This can result in drying up or substantially de-watering streams and rivers. Such actions make it difficult if not impossible for fish species like coho salmon and steelhead trout to survive, much less thrive. Providing flow releases will support restoration of important fishery resources, while still ensuring that there is adequate water to meet human needs as well.

Have studies been done on any possible environmental impacts from the project?

The City is preparing an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the project. An Initial Study and Notice of Preparation for the project were released in late 2018 to gather input on the scope of the EIR. The Draft EIR is under preparation and expected to be released for public review in spring of 2021. The Final EIR is expected to be completed in fall of 2021.