

# North Coast Salmon Project – 2021 Executive Report

April 2022

## Introduction

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife's (CDFW) North Coast Salmon Project (NCSP) was developed in 2018 as a part of the Sustainable Funding Program. The NCSP is collaborative in nature, with direct involvement of the restoration community, and aims to enhance the recovery of endangered Coho Salmon on California's north coast. The NCSP is led by an advisory team composed of CDFW program managers and supervisors from Region 1, Region 3, and Fisheries Branch in addition to leaders from several partner non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These partner NGOs include California Trout, Trout Unlimited, Salmonid Restoration Federation, The Nature Conservancy, and the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts.

The overall goal of the NCSP is to evaluate the effectiveness of past Coho Salmon recovery efforts, identify actions that will expedite and enhance Coho Salmon recovery on California's north coast, and provide recommendations on how all CDFW programs work to support recovery. Four main objectives were identified to achieve this goal and guide the efforts of the NCSP. These objectives are to be met through coordinated efforts of NCSP staff in collaboration with other CDFW programs, stakeholders, government agencies, and the restoration community. The NCSP objectives are as follows:

1. Evaluate recovery actions from CDFW's 2004 Recovery Strategy for California Coho Salmon (State Coho Recovery Strategy) and Priority Action Coho Team (PACT) report that have been completed to date and collaborate with regional watershed groups/partners to identify priority recovery efforts to implement moving forward utilizing PACT recommendations and the Salmon Habitat Restoration Priorities (SHaRP) process.
2. Assess current habitat, population, and effectiveness monitoring efforts and utilize these efforts to guide recovery actions.
3. Evaluate CDFW programs that affect the implementation of restoration actions and progress towards Coho Salmon recovery and develop recommendations on how to increase internal and external efficiencies and collaboration within and between these programs.
4. Explore local and regional conservation initiatives and strategies for Coho Salmon recovery and potential inclusion in NCSP. Promote water saving efforts and restoration projects that enhance flow during critical salmonid life stages.

Four focus areas were selected to implement NCSP efforts: Lagunitas Creek, Russian River tributaries, Mendocino Coast streams, and the Lower Eel and South

Fork Eel rivers. Evaluation and analysis of CDFW programs involved in Coho Salmon recovery is concentrated on these areas. The NCSP is also working towards developing a unique set of priority recommendations for each of the focus areas that will contribute to more effective, targeted restoration efforts to benefit Coho Salmon recovery.

This report is intended to provide an update on progress made by the NCSP through December 2021. The following sections provide a summary of tasks that were completed in 2021, tasks that are underway, and next steps for each of the four NCSP main objectives described above.

## **Project Objectives**

**Objective 1:** Evaluate recovery actions from the State Coho Recovery Strategy and PACT report that have been completed to date and collaborate with regional watershed partners to identify priority actions to implement moving forward utilizing PACT recommendations and the Salmon Habitat Restoration Priorities (SHaRP) process.

### *Tasks identified to achieve objective*

1. Analyze habitat restoration projects funded through CDFW's Fisheries Restoration Grant Program (FRGP) that have focused on Coho Salmon recovery in the four focus areas to evaluate success of recovery efforts.
2. Initiate SHaRP or SHaRP-inspired processes in the four focus areas to ultimately produce watershed plans with high-priority, high-resolution restoration actions.

### *Progress*

The NCSP has completed and published its [assessment of restoration projects](#), which is a comprehensive review of restoration projects funded through FRGP that have focused on Coho Salmon recovery from 2004 through 2018. This review assessed the number and types of projects funded for Coho Salmon and provided detailed analysis in focus areas on how FRGP funding has aligned with CDFW recommendations. The NCSP analyzed range-wide and watershed-specific trends in grant funding to make recommendations regarding how FRGP could align itself with the highest priorities for Coho Salmon and meet FRGP's intended purpose of restoring habitat to recover listed salmonid populations.

Parallel SHaRP processes are proceeding in the four focus areas. After the completion of the South Fork Eel River SHaRP process, the [South Fork Eel River SHaRP Plan](#) was published by CDFW and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in 2021. This report was the first of its kind and will serve as a model for additional restoration planning documents that result from SHaRP processes in the other NCSP watersheds. Two multi-day meetings were held for the Mendocino Coast SHaRP efforts covering six HUC 12 watersheds (North Fork Ten

Mile River, Middle Fork Ten Mile River, South Fork Ten Mile River, South Fork Big River, North Fork Big River, and Lower Big River) in 2021. In the lower Russian River basin, the SHaRP steering team conducted background data compilation and analysis for Green Valley Creek and hosted a meeting with project advisors to review data. The Green Valley Creek one-day SHaRP stakeholder meeting was held in January 2022. Lagunitas Creek hosted a two-day meeting with stakeholders in 2021 and developed action maps for San Geronimo-Lagunitas Creek and Olema Creek-Lagunitas Creek HUC 12 watersheds covered through SHaRP. The Lagunitas steering team is actively working on an action plan comprised of the restoration priorities developed in the meeting and is currently seeking feedback from meeting participants and agency staff on a draft.

### *Next Steps*

NCSP team members are continuing SHaRP efforts in the four focus areas by hosting additional meetings and writing action plans. While efforts have been completed on the South Fork Eel River, staff are now in the early phases of expanding into the Lower Eel River, collecting data and working with local stakeholders for this effort. The Mendocino Coast SHaRP team plans on having three additional meetings to cover the remaining nine prioritized sub-watersheds and is writing action plans. The Russian River team plans to host two more meetings covering the remaining three tributaries (Dutch Bill, Willow, and Mill creeks). The Lagunitas Creek team is currently drafting a SHaRP action plan and is soliciting feedback from meeting participants before sending the plan for agency (NOAA and CDFW) review.

**Objective 2:** Evaluate current habitat, population, and effectiveness monitoring efforts and utilize these efforts to guide recovery actions.

### *Tasks identified to achieve objectives*

1. Review and document the available population and habitat monitoring data and provide summaries of the strengths, weaknesses, data uses, and applications to management.
2. Provide recommendations for improvements to population and habitat monitoring including suggestions to enhance the utility of monitoring data, expand the scope of inference and accuracy of monitoring data, and standardize data collection and data reporting.

### *Progress*

The NCSP team has developed an outline for the monitoring deliverable which will address both tasks listed above. This deliverable will evaluate current habitat, population, and effectiveness monitoring efforts and utilize these efforts to guide recovery actions through targeted recommendations.

## *Next Steps*

The team has received manager approval for the final outline of the monitoring deliverable and will start to write the first draft of the monitoring report. Once the first draft of the report is complete, it will be sent to supervisors for review and approval.

**Objective 3:** Evaluate CDFW programs that affect the implementation of restoration actions and progress towards Coho recovery and develop recommendations on how to increase internal and external efficiencies and collaboration within and between these programs.

## *Tasks identified to achieve objectives*

1. Distribute a permitting and granting survey for stakeholders and restoration practitioners.
2. Host (jointly, with CDFW permitting staff) a public workshop to discuss and prioritize actions for improving the CDFW permitting process.
3. Provide an analysis report of CDFW permitting processes.
4. Identify potential collaborative efforts between and among state agencies that could benefit Coho Salmon recovery.

## *Progress*

The NCSP team created and administered a survey of restoration stakeholders in 2020. Almost 50 participants completed this survey, and the team analyzed these data to gain insight into the roadblocks and opportunities in the permitting and granting processes. During the analysis phase NCSP staff met several times with permitting and granting staff in CDFW to discuss existing tools and the opportunity to develop new approaches to address feedback from restoration professionals provided from the survey. The team published a [report](#) documenting the results of the survey and included recommendations for improving the permitting and granting processes. The data and insights provided by this survey were used by the NCSP team in the development of the North Coast Coho Recovery Proposal Solicitation Notice (PSN) as part of CDFW's Cutting the Green Tape (CGT) initiative.

The [North Coast Coho Recovery PSN](#), which prioritized funding for projects that intended to further recovery of Coho Salmon within NCSP watersheds, was developed in collaboration with NCSP staff. Staff helped create the PSN document, scope, structure of the application process, and the supporting documents to be used by applicants in selecting high priority restoration projects. The PSN was released in the summer of 2021 and closed on December 3, 2021. Applications for 34 projects were received representing mostly planning and implementation projects spread across all four NCSP focus watersheds. The NCSP team was asked to assist with technical review of applications, which ran through January 2022.

## *Next Steps*

Deliverables for this objective have been met. The NCSP will continue to support and collaborate with CGT staff in their efforts towards streamlining of CDFW granting and permitting programs that benefit Coho Salmon restoration.

**Objective 4:** Explore local and regional conservation initiatives and strategies for Coho Salmon recovery and potential inclusion in NCSP. Promote water saving efforts and restoration projects that enhance flow during critical salmonid life stages.

## *Tasks identified to achieve objectives*

1. Report on past and present instream flow improvement strategies and regulatory challenges to implementation within the four focus areas.
2. Promote available programs such as Voluntary Drought Initiative and Safe Harbor Agreements that work with landowners to improve instream flow for Coho and steelhead.

## *Progress*

NCSP staff are available to review Regional Conservation Investment Strategies and Natural Community Conservation Plans that include habitat restoration projects that support Coho Salmon and steelhead recovery.

A report outlining instream flow restoration projects, including bottlenecks to implementation, is in progress. During SHaRP stakeholder meetings held thus far within NCSP focus watersheds, water quantity was identified as a limiting attribute for all life stages of Coho Salmon and steelhead. Recommendations addressing instream flow during SHaRP stakeholder meetings will be included in the final SHaRP restoration action plans.

## *Next Steps*

Through the SHaRP process, NCSP staff will continue to identify reaches within the focus watersheds that are in need of instream flow projects, including storage and forbearance. Ideally, the NCSP will also work with local Resource Conservation Districts, Land Trusts, Watershed Councils, and State water rights coordinators to promote recommendations made in the SHaRP watershed plans. NCSP staff will continue to provide support in promoting the [California Voluntary Drought Initiative](#) outreach efforts. This includes sharing CDFW and Wildlife Conservation Board drought and climate change funding opportunities with stakeholders. NCSP staff will also be available to assist regional staff with emergency fish rescue and relocation efforts.

**Concluding remarks:** The NCSP team will be reassessing and updating project objectives in 2022 to address completed objectives, potentially add new project

deliverables, and better reflect long-term priorities in the evaluation and enhancement of north coast Coho Salmon recovery.