

Lake Sonoma and Warm Springs Dam Fact Sheet

Warm Springs Dam and Lake Sonoma History

To reduce chronic and devastating flooding to communities along the Russian River, in 1937 growers in Sonoma and Mendocino counties organized to promote a federally developed flood control project. As a result of this successful effort, in 1948, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a study of the Russian River Project (project). The Sonoma County Water Agency was created by legislation in 1949, in part to serve as the local sponsor for the first component of the project – the construction of Coyote Valley Dam (completed in 1959), which created Lake Mendocino.

Warm Springs Dam, which created Lake Sonoma, was the second component of the project. Lake Sonoma was developed for three purposes:

- Flood control (particularly for the lower Russian River communities)
- Water supply
- Recreation

Warm Springs Dam Funding

Funding for the construction of Warm Springs Dam, its maintenance and operations, and downstream channel improvements was provided by the federal government. As the local sponsor of the Russian River Project, Sonoma Water was responsible for 35 percent of these costs, which was paid through a countywide bond measure that was approved by Sonoma County voters in 1974. The bonds are paid for over time through an *ad valorem* property tax, which was approved by the Sonoma Water Board of Directors.

The revenue from the tax is restricted and can be used only for those costs that are required for operations and maintenance of the Russian River Project, including (1) the local sponsor's costs of construction of the dam; (2) the local sponsor's costs for operations costs of the Project; (3) the local sponsor's costs for any major maintenance and repair costs for the dams; (4) Sonoma Water's obligations under the Russian River Project's Operations and Maintenance Manual, including channel stabilization within the main stem Russian River; and (5) costs associated with compliance with the Endangered Species Act related to the operations of the Project.

While all Sonoma County taxpayers pay the *ad valorem* property tax, the diversion, treatment, and conveyance of Lake Sonoma project water are funded via water rates, which is a separate charge that is paid by Sonoma Water's contractors. The residential and business customers of water contractors therefore pay two charges – both water fees and the *ad valorem* property tax.

An effort to repeal the bond and stop the construction of the dam was mounted in 1979 but was roundly defeated by voters.

Warm Springs Dam construction was completed in 1982, and thanks to one of the wettest years on record, Lake Sonoma was filled by 1983.

Benefits of Lake Sonoma

While Lake Sonoma provides critical water to hundreds of thousands of people, it also has broader benefits to the community, including:

- Lake Sonoma / Warm Springs Dam, among multiple functions, serve to reduce flood risk in communities along the Russian River. This includes a population in excess of 50,000 in the nearby communities of Healdsburg, Windsor, Guerneville, and the lower river, as well as guarding against \$2 billion to \$5 billion of economic damages from flooding along the river.
- Prior to the construction of the Russian River Project, most cities and water districts relied primarily on groundwater to meet residential and commercial demands. The availability of year-round water has allowed Sonoma Water's contractors (the cities of Cotati, Petaluma, Rohnert Park, Santa Rosa, and Sonoma; the town of Windsor; and Valley of the Moon and North Marin water districts) to significantly reduce groundwater pumping.
- From 2017 to 2021, Sonoma Water supplied 90 percent of water that its customers use, while only 10 percent of the water used by cities and water districts came from groundwater. This 'conjunctive use' strategy has significantly reduced pressure on the groundwater basins, leaving more water for other users, including rural residents, farmers, and the environment. This was shown in the southern Santa Rosa Plain groundwater basin when the cities of Rohnert Park and Cotati shifted their water supplies from primarily groundwater to primarily Russian River supplies. Prior to this shift (1970s-1990's), groundwater levels were significantly decreasing. When the shift to Russian River water supplies was made, the groundwater levels rebounded to pre-pumping levels.
- The summertime releases of water from Lake Sonoma into Dry Creek and the reductions of flooding in Dry Creek Valley have allowed the growth of a vibrant wine industry, known internationally for high-quality grapes.
- Lake Sonoma is the largest freshwater recreational area in Sonoma County, bringing county residents and tourists to the area and serving as a hub for campers, boating, hikers, and hunters.