Request for Renewal of Marine Mammal Protection Act
Incidental Harassment Authorization

Russian River Estuary Management Project

Applicant:
Sonoma County Water Agency
404 Aviation Blvd
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

January 2016

(1) A detailed description of the specific activity or class of activities that can be expected to result in incidental taking of marine mammals.

The Russian River estuary is located about 97 kilometers (km; 60 miles) northwest of San Francisco in Jenner, Sonoma County, California (Figure 1). The Russian River watershed encompasses 3,847 square kilometers (km) (1,485 square miles) in Sonoma, Mendocino, and Lake Counties. The estuary extends from the mouth of the Russian River upstream approximately 10 to 11 km (6 to 7 miles) between Austin Creek and the community of Duncans Mills (Heckel 1994).

The estuary may close throughout the year as a result of a barrier beach forming across the mouth of the Russian River. The mouth is located at Goat Rock State Beach (California Department of Parks and Recreation). Closures may occur at any time of the year (Heckel 1994; Merritt Smith Consulting 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000; Sonoma County Water Agency [SCWA] and Merritt Smith Consulting 2001; SCWA 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015). Closures result in formation of a lagoon behind the barrier beach and, as water surface levels rise in the estuary, flooding may occur. Natural breaching events occur when estuary water surface levels exceed the capability of the barrier beach to impound water, causing localized erosion of the barrier beach and creation of a tidal channel that reconnects the Russian River to the Pacific Ocean.

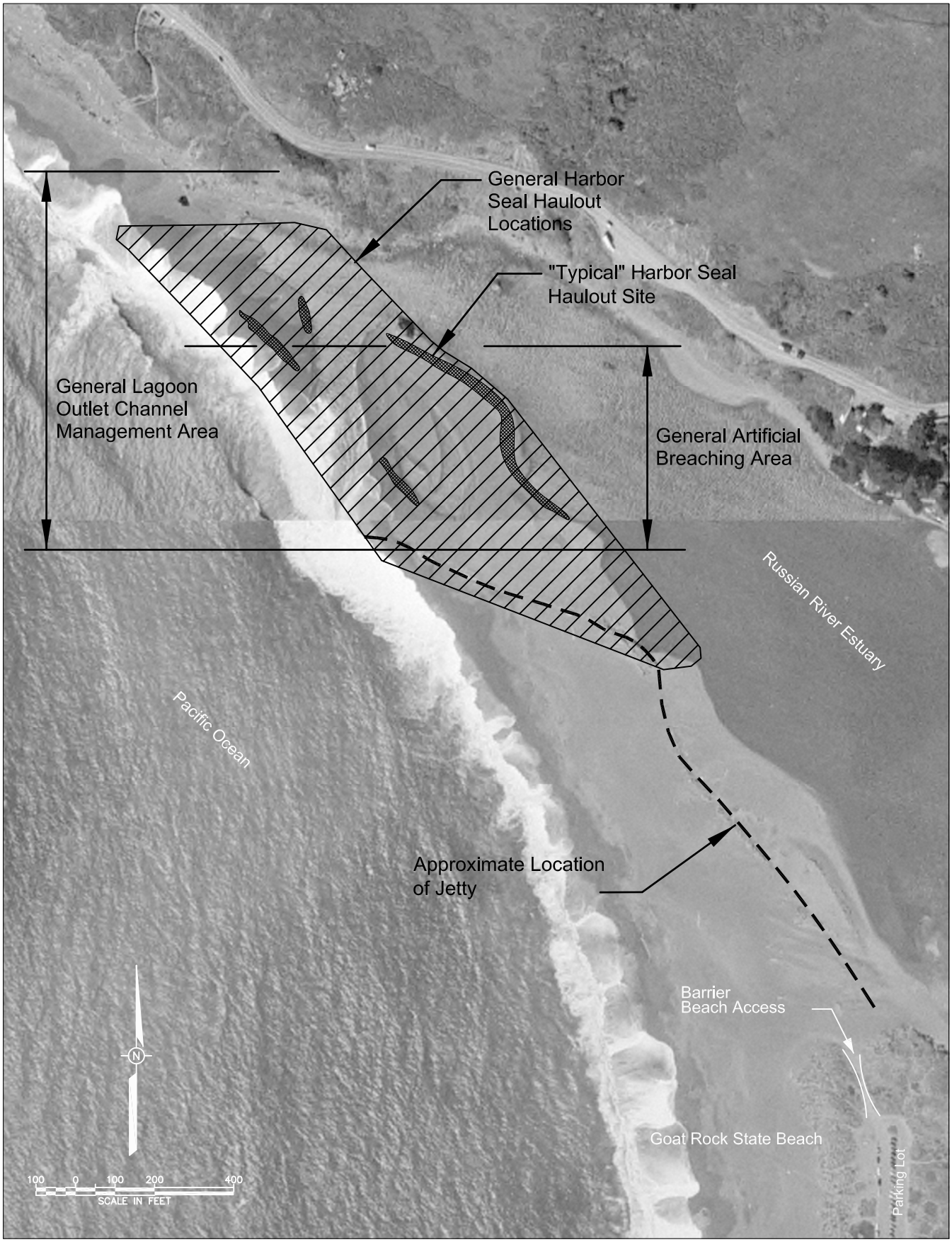
The barrier beach has also been artificially breached for decades; first by local citizens, then the County of Sonoma Public Works Department, and, since 1995, by the Sonoma County Water Agency (Water Agency). The Water Agency's artificial breaching activities are conducted in accordance with the Russian River Estuary Management Plan recommended in the Russian River Estuary Study 1992-1993 (Heckel 1994). The study was completed to evaluate the impacts of artificial breaching and to select a preferred estuary management program. The purpose of artificially breaching the barrier beach is to alleviate potential flooding of low-lying properties along the estuary. The Water Agency accesses the beach from the paved parking lot at Goat Rock State Beach, located at the end of Goat Rock Road off of Highway 1 (Figure 2). Equipment (*e.g.,* a bulldozer, excavator, or similar equipment) is off-loaded in the parking lot and driven onto the beach via an existing access point. A pilot channel in the sandbar is created at a sufficient depth to allow river flows to scour open the mouth of the river and reduce the water surface elevations in the estuary. As the channel is dug, it first remains disconnected from the estuary by maintaining a portion of the barrier beach on the estuary side (as opposed to the ocean side of the beach) to avoid flowing water in the channel. The sand excavated is placed onto the beach adjacent to the pilot channel. After the pilot channel is dug, the last portion of the sandbar adjacent to the estuary is removed, allowing river water to flow to the ocean. The size of the pilot channel varies depending on the height of the barrier beach to be breached, the tide level, and the water surface elevation in the estuary. A typical pilot channel would be approximately 100 feet long, 25 feet wide and 6 feet deep. The amount of sand moved can range from less than 100 cubic yards up to 2,000 cubic yards. After the last portion of the barrier beach is removed, water begins flowing out of the channel, scouring and enlarging the channel to widths of 50 to 100 feet within one or two tidal cycles. Very rapid enlargement, from approximately 25 feet to over 200 feet, has been observed (Heckel 1994).

From 1996 to 2015, the barrier beach was breached during every month of the year, but the majority of breaching events occurred in the fall (October and November), followed by the spring (May) and winter (December) (Figure 3). The number of artificial breaching events varies each year (Table 1). The lowest number of breaching events occurred in 2011 (no events) and the highest number was 15 attempted breaches (13 successful artificial breaching events) in 2009. There were four artificial breaching events in 2015. It is difficult to predict how many artificial breaching events are required each year, but there have been an average of five artificial breaching events annually over the last 20 years.

SPECIAL PROJECTS/RUSSIAN RIVER/7104-ESTUARY/EstuaryManage-PinnipedMonitoring.mxd December 9,2015

Pinniped haul-outs at the Russian River Estuary and surrounds.

Figure 1



Purpose: Russian River Estuary Breaching
Datum: 1929 MSL
Property Owners Adjacent to Project:

SONOMA COUNTY WATER AGENCY
404 Aviation Boulevard
Santa Rosa, CA. 95403

In: Russian River
At: Jenner
County Of: Sonoma, CA.
Application By: SCWA

Figure 2

\\SD-DATA\Proj\special projects\russian river\ESTUARY-Management-MMPA-IHA.dwg March 1, 2011

BIOLOGICAL OPINION AND THE ESTUARY

The Water Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) consulted with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) regarding the potential effects of their operations and maintenance activities, including the Water Agency's Estuary Management Program, on federally-listed steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), coho salmon (*O. kisutch*), and Chinook salmon (*O. tshawytscha*). As a result of this consultation, the NMFS issued the Russian River Biological Opinion (NMFS 2008) finding that artificially elevated inflows to the Russian River estuary during the low flow season (May through October) and historic artificial breaching practices have significant adverse effects on the Russian River's estuarine rearing habitat for steelhead trout. The historic method of artificial sandbar breaching, which is done in response to rising water levels behind the barrier beach, adversely affects the estuary's water quality and depths.

The historic artificial breaching practices create a tidal marine environment with shallow freshwater depths and high salinity. Salinity stratification contributes to low dissolved oxygen at the bottom in some areas. The Biological Opinion (NMFS 2008) concludes that the combination of high inflows and breaching practices impact rearing habitat because they interfere with natural processes that cause a freshwater lagoon to form behind the barrier beach. Fresh or brackish water lagoons at the mouths of many streams in central and southern California often provide depths and water quality that are highly favorable to the survival of rearing salmon and steelhead.

The Biological Opinion's Reasonable and Prudent Alternative (RPA) 2 (NMFS 2008) requires the Water Agency to collaborate with NMFS and to modify estuary water level management in order to reduce marine influence (high salinity and tidal inflow) and promote a higher water surface elevation in the estuary (formation of a fresh or brackish lagoon) for purposes of enhancing the quality of rearing habitat for juvenile (age-0+ and -1+) steelhead from May 15th to October 15th (referred to hereafter as the "lagoon management period").[1] A program of potential, incremental steps are prescribed to accomplish this, including adaptive management of a lagoon outlet channel on the barrier beach.

In accordance with the Biological Opinion's RPA 2 the Water Agency commissioned a draft study plan to analyze the effects and role of the existing, remnant Goat Rock State Beach jetty on beach permeability, seasonal sand storage and transport, seasonal flood risk, and seasonal water surface elevations in the Russian River estuary (ESA PWA 2011). Implementation of this study plan which includes the installation and maintenance of monitoring wells and geophysical surveys began in 2014 and data collection from the ground seepage monitoring wells is ongoing

[1] The lagoon management period is May 15th to October 15th, as described in the Russian River Biological Opinion (NMFS 2008).

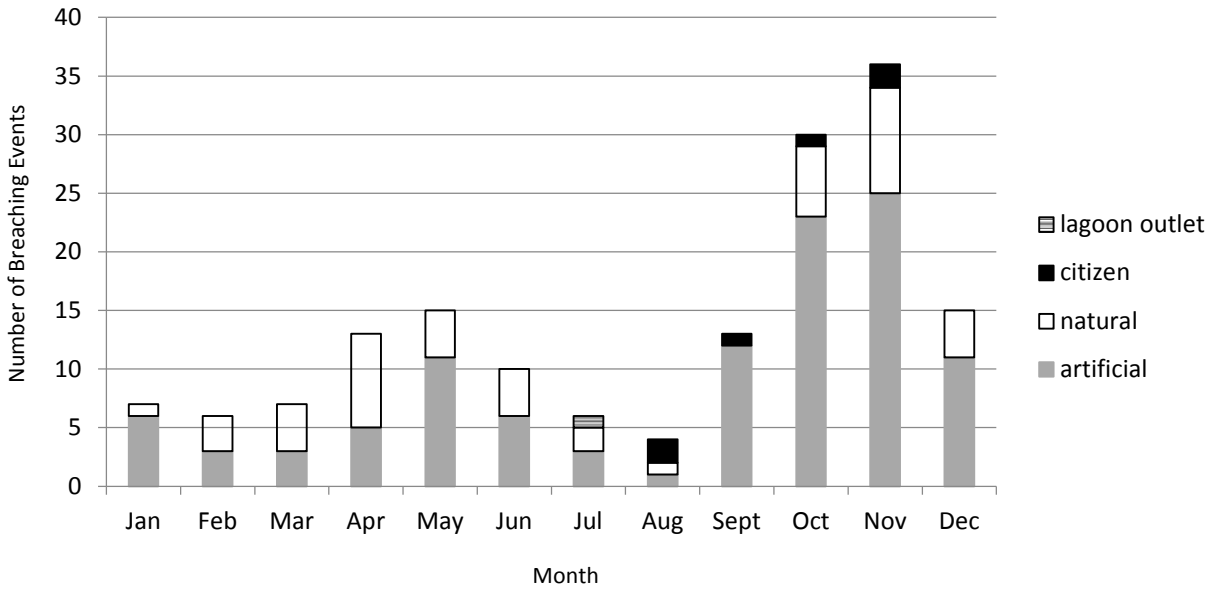


Figure 3. The number of Russian River estuary breaching events from 1996 to 2015, by month.

Table 1. Breaching of the Russian River estuary from 1996 to 2015. Number of times breached by year and month, including artificial breaches by Sonoma County Water Agency, lagoon outlet channel implementation by SCWA (denoted by {#}), natural breaches (denoted by [#]), and breaches conducted by private individuals without a Corps permit, (denoted by (#)).

Month	Year																			
	1996	**1997**	**1998***	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**	**2015**
January						1								1, [1]	1		1		2	
February												2						1	[1]	[2]
March		1, [1]						[1]										[2]	1	1
April		[1]				2			[1]			3	[1]	[1]				[1]	[2]	[1]
May		1, [1]			1	3			1				5						[2]	[1]
June		2		1	1		1	[1]						1			[1]	[1]		[1]
July	1			1									1		{1},[1]			[1]		
August	(2)	1							[1]											
September	1, (1)	2	4	1	1					1			1	1						
October	1	1	3	2	2	2	[1]	2	(1)	1	[1]	[1]	1	4	2,[1]		[1]	1	1	[1]
November	[1]	1	1	1, [1]	4	[1]	3	1	(2)	2	[3]	2	1	4	[1]		[2]	1	1	3
December					2		1				[1]	2	1, [1]	4				1, [1]		[1]
TOTAL	7	12	8	7	11	9	6	5	6	4	5	10	12	17	6	0	5	10	10	11
SCWA	3	9	8	6	11	8	5	3	1	4	0	9	10	15	3	0	1	4	5	4

* Type of breach was not recorded for 1998. All breaching events for 1998 are treated as done by Sonoma County Water Agency.

Harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina richardsi*) regularly haul out at the mouth of the Russian River (Jenner haul-out) (Figure 1). California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*) and northern elephant seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*) are occasionally observed at the haul-out. There are also several known river resting areas at logs and rock piles in the Russian River estuary (Figure 1). The Water Agency is applying for incidental harassment authorization (IHA) under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) for activities associated with Russian River estuary management activities. These activities include:

- excavation and maintenance of a lagoon outlet channel that would facilitate management of a barrier beach at the mouth of the Russian River and creation of a summer lagoon to improve rearing habitat for listed steelhead as required by the Russian River Biological Opinion (NMFS 2008);
- artificially breaching the barrier beach to minimize the potential for flooding of low-lying properties along the estuary;
- monitoring activities associated with the management actions described above; and
- maintenance of monitoring wells on the barrier beach south of the jetty.

LAGOON OUTLET CHANNEL MANAGEMENT

To comply with the Russian River Biological Opinion, the Water Agency plans to adaptively manage water surface elevations between May 15th and October 15th (lagoon management period) after a barrier beach forms and creates a lagoon.[2] Modifications to the barrier beach would be small departures from the existing beach and channel topography at the time of closure, and the new channel would be similar to the channel configurations resulting from previous breaching practices and consistent with natural processes. Any sand excavated from the channel will be placed on the adjacent beach and graded to depths of approximately 1-2 ft higher than the existing grade. The placed sand will be distributed in such a way as to minimize changes to beach topography. If the time available for excavation is limited by uncontrollable factors such as tides, waves, seal use, or days when operations are forbidden, sand placed on the north side of the channel may be left in piles up to 3 ft high and not blended into the existing beach topography. The piles may need to remain un-graded on the north side because equipment access to this side is more difficult and may slow down operations. The outlet channel would be constructed to dimensions which do not significantly depart from channels which have been historically observed at the site.

The adaptive lagoon outlet channel management plan seeks to work with natural processes and site conditions to maintain an outlet channel that reduces tidal inflow of saline water into the estuary (ESA 2015). To avoid tidal inflow and maintain a lagoon system that would not flood properties adjacent to the estuary, the Water Agency would create and maintain a shallow, "perched" outlet channel that would not be excavated as deeply, narrowly, or with as steep a gradient as typical artificial breaching pilot channels, which are designed to allow the current velocities to erode a wider and deeper channel and downcut into the barrier beach.

[2] The Russian River Biological Opinion (NMFS 2008) establishes the lagoon outlet channel management period as May 15th to October 15th.

Active management of estuarine/lagoon water levels would commence when ocean side wave action pushes sand landward to form a natural barrier beach across the river's mouth. When this happens, the Water Agency would monitor lagoon water surface elevation, as river inflow to the newly closed lagoon builds up behind the barrier beach, causing water surface elevation to rise in the lagoon. The goal is to manage lagoon water surface elevations between 4 and 9 ft National Geodetic Vertical Datum (NGVD)[3], which is high enough to enhance fish habitat (NMFS 2008) while also minimizing flood hazard to low-lying structures adjacent to the estuary (Heckel 1994).

The outlet channel would be excavated and maintained with one or two pieces of heavy machinery (*e.g.*, excavator or bulldozer). The outlet channel would be excavated with a bed elevation 0.5 to 2.0 ft below the lagoon water surface elevation along its entire length to allow outflow from the lagoon to pass over the sandbar. The outlet channel dimensions are estimated to be approximately 30-feet wide, based on a wide and short channel alignment that would minimize scour potential and potential constraints of the acceptable excavation volumes under regulatory permits. The outlet channel would be cut into the top of the naturally formed barrier beach. The outlet channel bed slope would be minimized to reduce the potential for bed scour and unintentional breaching of the sandbar. The outlet channel width and length estimates are consistent with historic river mouth widths and lengths observed within the lagoon management period (Behrens 2008).

The channel's length is estimated to vary from 100 to 400 ft, consistent with historic channel lengths observed within the management period (Behrens 2008). Length would be a function of the channel's planform alignment[4]. Planform alignment of the channel would vary within the region in which the channel has been observed to naturally occur (Figure 2). The southern extent of this region would be the jetty and would extend approximately 1,500 feet to the northwest. Various channel locations may be pursued in an effort to adapt other project variables, such as bed slope, bed elevation and channel width, and to take advantage of site features such as areas of reduced wave energy. For example, alignment at the start of the management period may follow the northward alignment typically observed at this time of year to take advantage of the low berm crest elevation along this alignment. However, the channel may migrate from this initial alignment. If the channel then closes, alternative channel alignments within the region shown in Figure 2 may be implemented to test the relationship of mouth location on channel stability.

[3] Water surface elevations are measured by the Water Agency's gauge located at the State Parks Visitor Center in Jenner.

[4] Planform alignment is the centerline alignment of the channel in planimetric view.

The strategy for outlet channel configuration and modifications would be an incremental approach that seeks to minimize the risk of uncontrolled breaching which returns the estuary to tidal conditions. The precise number of outlet channel implementation events would depend on uncontrollable variables such as seasonal ocean wave conditions (*e.g.,* wave heights and lengths), river inflows, and the success of previous excavations (*e.g.,* the success of selected channel widths and meander patterns) in forming an outlet channel that effectively maintains lagoon water surface elevations. It is predicted that up to three successive outlet channel excavations, at increasingly higher beach elevations, may be necessary, with the result being a "perched" lagoon. The goal is to develop an outlet channel that supports a stable "perched" lagoon with water surface elevations at approximately 7 ft NGVD for several months. Stable conditions imply that river inflow into the lagoon would be approximately the same as outflow through the outlet channel and that net sand deposition or erosion does not impair the outlet channel's function.

In the event that a "perched" outlet channel fails (*i.e*., erodes the barrier beach and forms a tidal inlet), the Water Agency would resume adaptive management of the outlet channel's width, slope, and alignment in consultation with NMFS and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) after ocean wave action naturally reforms a barrier beach and closes the river's mouth during the lagoon management period.

Additional details regarding the development of the adaptive lagoon outlet channel management plan may be found in *Russian River Estuary Outlet Channel Adaptive Management Plan 2015* (ESA 2015) attached to this application.

Lagoon Outlet Channel Implementation and Maintenance

The Water Agency would contact State Parks lifeguards, as well as State Park District headquarters and the Monte Rio Fire Protection District, within 24 hours prior to excavating and maintaining the lagoon outlet channel to minimize potential hazards to beach visitors. Signs and barriers would be posted 750 feet of each side of the outlet channel for 24 hours prior to and after excavation events to warn beach visitors of the hazards of the area and the presence of pinnipeds on the beach. Notifications for the general public would also be posted at the Jenner visitor's center boat launch and in other locations along the estuary.

The barrier beach would be accessed from the paved parking lot at Goat Rock State Beach, located at the end of Goat Rock Road off of Highway 1 (Figure 2). Equipment would be off-loaded in the parking lot and driven north onto the beach via an existing access point. Water Agency crews would approach the seal haul-out ahead of the heavy equipment to minimize the potential for flushes to result in a stampede, a particular concern during pupping season. Water Agency staff would avoid walking or driving equipment through the seal haul-out. Crews on foot would take caution to approach the haul-out slowly and to make an effort to be seen from a distance, if possible, rather than appearing suddenly at the top of the sandbar. Personnel on the beach would include up to two equipment operators, three safety team members on the beach (one on each side of the channel observing the equipment operators, and one at the barrier to warn beach visitors away from the activities), and one safety team

member at the overlook on Highway 1 above the beach. Occasionally, there would be two or more additional people on the beach (Water Agency staff or regulatory agency staff) on the beach to observe the activities. Water Agency staff would be followed by the equipment, which would then be followed by a Water Agency vehicle (typically a small pickup truck, the vehicle would be parked at the previously posted signs and barriers on the south side of the excavation location). Equipment would be driven slowly on the beach and care would be taken to minimize the number of shut-downs and start-ups when the equipment is on the beach.

Creating and maintaining the outlet channel would probably employ one or two pieces of heavy equipment (*e.g.,* excavator or bulldozer) to move sand on the beach. At the start of the management period (late spring or early summer), when configuring the outlet channel for the first time that year, machinery may operate on up to 2 consecutive working days. As technical staff and maintenance crews gain more experience with implementing the outlet channel and observing its response, it may be possible to reduce the frequency of maintenance during the remainder of the management season. In consideration of the beach environment, effort would be made to minimize the amount and frequency of mechanical intervention, thereby reducing disturbances to seals and other wildlife, as well as State Park's visitors on the beach.

The quantity of sand moved would depend on antecedent beach topography. Excavation volumes would not exceed 2,000 cubic yards. Any sand excavated from the channel would be immediately placed on the adjacent beach within the wave wash zone to promote natural removal to minimize changes to beach topography outside the outlet channel.

The Water Agency anticipates that lagoon outlet channel management activities would occur in accordance with the Russian River Biological Opinion and that they would primarily occur between May 15th and October 15th. However, if estuary water surface elevations rise above 7.0 feet (at the Jenner gauge) during the lagoon management period, the Water Agency may consult with NMFS and CDFW regarding artificially breaching the sandbar to alleviate potential flooding, as discussed in the Biological Opinion and described below.

ARTIFICIAL BREACHING

Artificial breaching activities occur on the closed sandbar when a barrier beach is formed. The Water Agency mechanically breaches the sandbar to alleviate potential flooding of low-lying shoreline properties near the town of Jenner. For more than a decade, breaching has been performed in accordance with the *Russian River Estuary Study 1992-1993* (Heckel 1994) when the estuary water surface level is between 4.5 and 7.0 feet as read at the Jenner gauge (located at the Jenner Visitor's Center). The Water Agency would contact State Parks lifeguards, as well as State Park District headquarters and the Monte Rio Fire Protection District, within 24 hours prior to breaching activities to minimize potential hazards to beach visitors. Signs and barriers would be posted 750 feet of each side of the pilot channel for 24 hours prior to and after breaching events to warn beach visitors of the hazards of the breaching area and the presence of pinnipeds on the beach. Notifications for the general public would also be posted at the Jenner visitor's center boat launch and in other locations along the estuary.

The barrier beach would be accessed from the paved parking lot at Goat Rock State Beach, located at the end of Goat Rock Road off of Highway 1 (Figure 2). Equipment would be off-loaded in the parking lot and driven north onto the beach via an existing access point. Water Agency crews would approach the seal haul-out ahead of the heavy equipment to minimize the potential for flushes to result in a stampede, a particular concern during pupping season. Water Agency staff would avoid walking or driving equipment through the seal haul-out. Crews on foot would take caution to approach the haul-out slowly and to make an effort to be seen from a distance, if possible, rather than appearing suddenly at the top of the sandbar. Personnel on the beach would include an equipment operator, three safety team members on the beach (one on each side of the channel observing the equipment operators, and one at the barrier to warn beach visitors away from the breaching activities), and one safety team member at the overlook on Highway 1 above the beach. Occasionally, there would be two or more additional people on the beach (Water Agency staff or regulatory agency staff) to observe breaching activities. Water Agency staff would be followed by the equipment, which would then be followed by a Water Agency vehicle (typically a small pickup truck, the vehicle would be parked at the previously posted signs and barriers on the south side of the excavation location). Equipment would be driven slowly on the beach and care would be taken to minimize the number of shut-downs and start-ups when the equipment is on the beach.

Breaching activities would typically be conducted on outgoing tides to maximize the elevation head difference between the estuary water surface and the ocean. A cut in the barrier beach would be created at a sufficient depth to allow river flows to begin transporting sand to the ocean. Excavated sand would be placed onto the beach adjacent to the pilot channel. After the pilot channel is dug, the last upstream portion of the sandbar would be removed, allowing river water to flow to the ocean. The size of the pilot channel varies depending on the height of the sandbar to be breached, the tide level, and the water surface elevation in the estuary. A typical channel would be approximately 100 feet long, 25 feet wide and 6 feet deep. The amount of sand moved would range from less than 100 cubic yards to approximately 2,000 cubic yards.

The Water Agency anticipates that artificial breaching activities would occur in accordance with the Russian River Biological Opinion and that they would primarily occur from October 16th to May 14th. However, if estuary water surface elevations rise above 7.0 feet (at the Jenner gauge) during the lagoon management period (May 15th through October 15th), the Water Agency could artificially breach the sandbar to alleviate potential flooding, as discussed in the Biological Opinion. The Biological Opinion incidental take statement estimates that the Water Agency may need to artificially breach the sandbar "twice per year between May 15 and October 15 during the first three years covered by this opinion, and once per year between May 15 and October 15 during years 4-15 covered by this opinion" (NMFS 2008).

GOAT ROCK STATE BEACH JETTY STUDY

Implementation of the *Feasibility of Alternatives to the Goat Rock State Beach Jetty for Managing Lagoon Water Surface Elevations* Study Plan (ESA PWA 2011) requires monitoring of water seepage through the barrier beach and geophysical mapping of the submerged substrate and structures. This study is a requirement of the Biological Opinion's RPA 2. Implementation

of the study plan began in March 2014. Wells are located between the Goat Rock State Beach parking lot and the concrete-capped portion of the jetty that lies above the sand. The well sites on the beach barrier would be accessed through an existing access road at the north point of the Goat Rock State Beach parking lot. Temperature and conductivity measuring devices were installed in each well. Wells were capped and buried below the sand surface to prevent vandalism and tourist interaction. Monitoring of the wells and downloads from the installed equipment will continue periodically as long as the wells are in place. Visits to the well sites are not anticipated to disturb seals since the wells are not located near the haul-out. Removal of the wells is planned for summer 2016. A drilling company would remove the PVC casings (monitoring wells) using an 8" hollow stem auger using a CME 750X drill rig equipped with 31" balloon tires along with a 4x4 wheel drive service truck.

The following measures would be implemented to avoid the possibility of excavated materials from the well removal running off into the Russian River estuary. Excavated materials would be contained on the west side of the borehole and silt fences would be placed five feet inland along the estuary shoreline. Due to the presence of an endangered plant species on the beach within close proximity of the well construction site (Figure 4), excavated materials from the far-east monitoring well on Transect 2 would be contained on the northwest side of the borehole. Personnel would also be present to monitor the well removal activities and intervene if the activities would disturb the plant habitat. The locations of the monitoring wells were chosen to be a safe distance from known seal haul-outs to prevent disturbance. In addition, Water Agency personnel will be present to monitor the removal activities and record any incidental disturbance to the harbor seals. The monitoring wells are located south of the concrete-capped portion of the jetty and the known haul-out; equipment would not need to drive through or past the haul-out. The noise generated from the drill is estimated to be 85-90 db at a distance of 20 ft. The safe threshold of received noise levels in air for pinnipeds, as defined by NFMS, is 90 dB (Ben Laws pers. com.) Given that known pinniped haul-outs are located greater than 200ft from the location of the wells, the anticipated received noise levels will be below the safe threshold for disturbance.

MONITORING

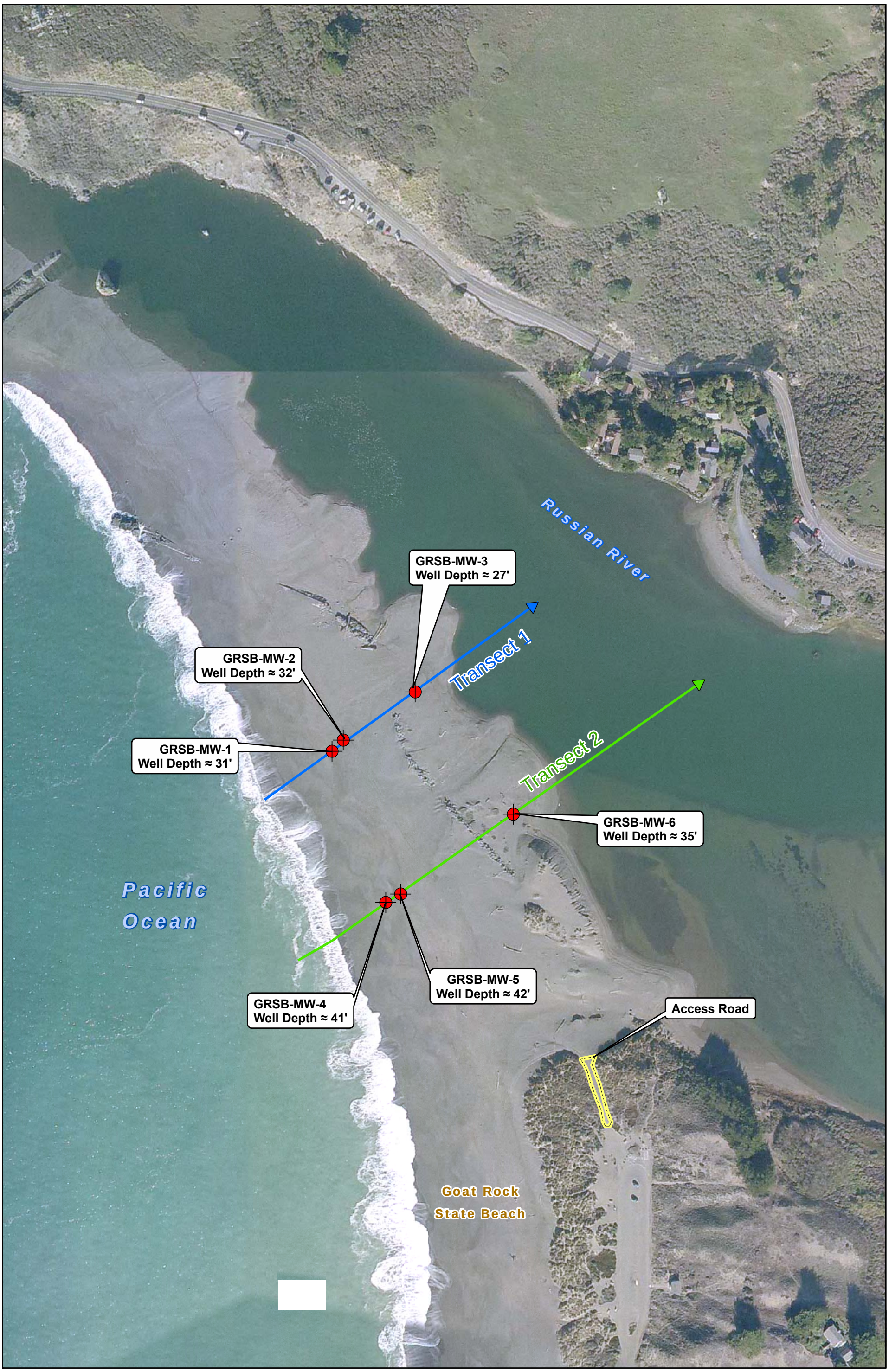
Implementation of the lagoon outlet channel adaptive management plan would require monitoring to measure changes in the beach and channel elevation, lengths, and widths, as well as flow velocities and observations of the bed structure (to identify bed forms and depth-dependent grain size distribution indicative of armoring) in the channel. In addition to the activities described for the lagoon outlet channel adaptive management plan, the Water Agency is required by the Russian River Biological Opinion and other state and federal permits to collect biological, water quality, and physical habitat data in conjunction with estuary management. Fisheries sampling, water quality monitoring, invertebrate/sediment sampling, and physical habitat measurements require the use of boats and nets in the estuary. Similar to 2015, acoustic telemetry of tagged steelhead will continue as part of fisheries monitoring activities. This monitoring will involve at least two crew members in a small motorized boat travelling throughout the Estuary using an acoustic receiver to triangulate the location of fish equipped with acoustic tags. Boating and other monitoring activities occur in the vicinity of

river haul-outs (see Figure 1, and Mortenson 2009). Ground water seepage monitoring wells would also require periodic monitoring and maintenance by Water Agency staff who would visit the wells monthly to download data collected from inside the wells. Table 2 provides a summary of the monitoring tasks and the frequency of their implementation.

(2) The date(s) and duration of such activity and the specific geographical region where it would occur.

The anticipated marine mammal disturbance from project activity would occur at the mouth of the Russian River (38.450833, -123.129873) in Jenner, California. The Russian River estuary is located about 97 km (60 miles) northwest of San Francisco. The harbor seals primarily haul out on the estuary-side of the beach (Figures 1 and 2) to the north of the concrete-capped portion of the jetty.

The estuary closes throughout the year as a result of a sandbar forming at the mouth of the Russian River. To facilitate summer lagoon management, the Water Agency would construct the lagoon outlet channel after the first natural barrier beach closure, but the lagoon would generally be managed from May 15th to October 15th (Table 3). It is anticipated that the outlet channel implementation would be a 2-day event with initial construction of the lagoon outlet channel taking one day of work, and subsequent adjustments to the outlet channel on the second day. Subsequent maintenance would occur approximately weekly through October 15th. Artificial breaching activities would generally occur between October 16th and May 14th (Table 3). Biological and physical habitat monitoring generally occurs from mid-April through December, with the exception of topographic surveys that occur year round and acoustic telemetry that will occur during the summer months (Table 3).



Estuary Jetty Seepage Study
Sonoma County, CA

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1 inch = 200 feet

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Figure 4

SONOMA COUNTY WATER AGENCY

Table 2. Monitoring tasks associated with Russian River Estuary Management with potential to disturb pinnipeds.

Task	Description	Field Activities	Frequency
Lagoon Outlet Channel Management on the Barrier Beach			
Discharge Measurements	Collected within the outlet channel to verify the channel's conveyance.	2 field staff to complete cross sectional flow velocity surveys using flow meter attached to a wading rod with electronic data logger (beeps); bank pins to be installed on either bank, and fiberglass measuring tape stretched from bank to bank.	Every 2 weeks
Outlet Channel Bed Structure	Observe the bed for bed forms and depth-dependent grain size distribution indicative of armoring. Sediment sampler used.	2 field staff to collect sediment sample from the surface of the channel bed.	Monthly
Outlet channel topography	Collect outlet channel elevation and width	2 field staff would capture outlet channel features using a prism mounted on a survey rod.	Monthly
Biological and Physical Habitat Monitoring in the Estuary			
Fisheries seining	Deploy seine to collect fish at up to 10 locations in the estuary	One or two boats with approximately 6 field staff	Monthly
Fisheries acoustic telemetry	Collect location and habitat use data on salmonids equipped with acoustic tags	One boat with 2 field staff	Weekly
Invertebrate/salmonid prey study	Collection of benthic invertebrates and zooplankton	Two boats with 5-7 field staff	Monthly
Water quality	Collection of temperature, dissolved oxygen, conductivity, pH, depth, nutrient and bacteriological samples	A boat with 2 or 3 field staff, 6 datasonde arrays submerged in estuary at various locations from mouth to Duncans Mills.	Every 2 weeks
SCWA topographic survey of sandbar	Survey of sandbar height and widths	2 field staff on beach equipped with a survey rod.	Monthly
Bodega Marine Lab (BML) flow circulation (under contract w/SCWA)	Survey of cross sectional velocity data in estuary and collection of temperature and salinity profile data at various locations from mouth to Duncans Mills.	A boat with 2 or 3 field staff, collecting cross sectional data from mouth to Duncans Mills.	Weekly

(3) The species and numbers of marine mammals likely to be found within the activity area.

The species of marine mammals that are likely to occur in the project area include the following pinnipeds: harbor seals, California sea lions and northern elephant seals. Earlier literature reports sightings of sea lions during the months from December to June, likely foraging, but their numbers are normally low (Hanson 1993). Our data includes observations of sea lions in and around the estuary in all months of the year, except June. These sea lions were rarely observed hauled out on land at the Russian River. In February and April 2015 a juvenile sea lion was observed hauled out at the Russian River mouth. In previous years, a single male northern elephant seal (*Mirounga angustirostris*) had been present at the Jenner haul-out during the late winter and spring. Recently a sub-adult elephant seal was observed multiple times resting ashore at the Jenner harbor seal haul-out during July and August of 2014. Based on a tag located on the seal's rear flipper the elephant seal was identified as being tagged as a weaned pup on Año Nuevo Island, more than 100 miles south of Jenner (P. Robinson personal communication, August 14, 2014). Similarly a young elephant seal was observed at Jenner in August of 2013, prior to that the latest reported sighting was in spring of 2009.

The number of harbor seals at the Russian River varies throughout the year (Table 4). These numbers have been recorded extensively since 1972 at the mouth of the Russian River, where several local residents, working independently or under the guidance of the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods, have recorded the harbor seal population at the mouth and within the Russian River. It is believed that harbor seals established the haul-out site at the Russian River in 1972 (*i.e.,* the first known records) and their numbers at the site have steadily grown (Hanan and Beeson 1994, Mortenson and Twohy 1994, SCWA 2015). Pups are born at the Jenner haul-out beginning in March and continuing into May. Pups are counted during surveys through June, after which time it becomes difficult to distinguish pups from sub-adult seals. Peak seal abundance is typically during the summer molting period (Figure 5). Abundance of seals on the Jenner haul-out declines in the fall after the molting season is complete, but seals are present at Jenner and locally year round. The number of harbor seals at this haul-out has fluctuated from year to year (Figure 6). Currently the population of seals at the Jenner haul-out appears to be steady following an observed increase during 1980s and early 1990s. Based on the most recent statewide harbor seals counts during May-July of 2012 the state population is estimated at 30,968 seals (Carretta *et al.* 2015), which is lower than the 2009 and 2004 statewide estimates (Harvey and Goley 2011, Lowry *et al*. 2008). Table 4 reflects the monthly mean number of harbor seals recorded by E. Twohy during daily counts of seals at the Jenner haul-out from 1993 to 2005 (without differentiating between bar-open and bar-closed conditions) and includes monthly average seal abundance from the Water Agency's 2009 – 2015 baseline surveys. Table 5 shows the average number of harbor seals observed at the Jenner haul-out during bar-closed conditions by month from Water Agency observations since 2009.

Table 3. Estimated frequency and duration of Russian River estuary management activities with potential to disturb pinnipeds.

Task and Dates	Duration and Frequency	Potential No. of Take Events[a]
Lagoon Outlet Channel Management on the Sandbar (May 15 to October 15)		
Excavation of outlet channel	Daily up to 2 consecutive days per event; up to 3 events estimated.	3
Maintenance of outlet channel	1 day per week	May-1; June-4; July-4; Aug-4; Sept-4; Oct-1 (18 total)
Outlet channel discharge & bed structure measurements	Discharge: ½ day every 2 weeks Structure: ½ day per month (taken on same day as discharge measurements)	10[b]
Outlet channel topography	1 day per month	
Artificial Breaching on the Sandbar (October 16 to May 14)		
October November December January February March April May	Averages ½ day per breaching event	2[c] 2 2 1 1 1 1 2 12 events maximum
Biological and Physical Habitat Monitoring in the Estuary		
SCWA topographic survey of sandbar	1 per month for duration of IHA, averages ½ day	12
Fisheries seining	4 days, monthly from May to October	24[d]
Fisheries acoustic telemetry	3 days/week during May - September (20 weeks)	60[d]
Invertebrate/salmonid prey study	1 day monthly from May to October (during a mouth closure an additional 1 to 2 sampling events per month could be conducted)	18[d]
Water quality	2 days, every 2 weeks from April to December	36[d]
BML flow circulation (under contract w/SCWA)	Weekly from May to October	27
Investigations of Goat Rock Jetty Structure and Ground Water Seepage		
Removal of groundwater monitoring wells	2 days after July 1	2

[a] *For implementation of the lagoon outlet channel, an event is defined as a single, 2-day episode. It is assumed that the same individual seals would be hauled out during a single event. For the remaining activities, an event is defined as a single day on which an activity occurs. Some events may include multiple activities.*

[b] *The lagoon outlet channel discharge, bed structure, and channel topography monitoring would occur on the same day each month. The outlet channel discharge is collected every 2 weeks and would require an additional ½ day of work.*

[c] *The number of events is the monthly average number of bar closure events from 1996 to 2015 (Table 1). Based on the number of events, the maximum number of artificial breaching events would be 15. The average number of breaching events from 1996 to 2015 is 5 events/year.*

[d] *Assumption is that pinnipeds may be encountered once per event and flush from river haul-out in the Estuary.*

Table 4. Average daily number of seals observed at Goat Rock State Beach (at Russian River mouth), for each month from 1993 to 2005 (adapted from Mortenson and Twohy 1994 and Elinor Twohy unpublished data) and from the 2009-2015 Sonoma County Water Agency twice monthly baseline pinniped surveys.

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
1993	140	219	269	210	203	238	197	34	8	38	78	163
1994	138	221	243	213	208	212	246	98	26	31	101	162
1995	133	270	254	261	222	182	216	74	37	24	38	148
1996	144	175	261	247	157	104	142	65	17	29	76	139
1997	154	177	209	188	154	119	186	58	20	29	30	112
1998	119	151	192	93	170	213	232	53	33	21	93	147
1999	161	170	215	210	202	128	216	98	57	20	74	123
2000	151	185	240	180	158	245	256	63	46	50	86	127
2001	155	189	161	168	135	212	275	75	64	20	127	185
2002	117	12	20	154	134	213	215	89	43	26	73	126
2003	--	1	26	161	164	222	282	100	43	51	109	116
2004	2	5	39	180	202	318	307	35	40	47	68	61
2005	0	7	42	222	220	233	320	145	--	--	--	--
2009	--	--	--	--	--	--	219	117	17	22[a]	96[a]	80[a]
2010	66[a]	84	129	136	109	136	267	111	59	25	89	26
2011	116	92	162	124	128	145	219	98	31	53	92	48
2012	108	74	115	169	164	166	156	128	100	71	137	51
2013	51	108	158	112	162	139	411	175	77	58	34	94
n	26	17	31	35	35	34	24	35	28	33	18	35
2014	98	209	243	129	145	156	266	134	53	15	27	172
n	35	32	35	35	33	25	33	35	31	28	35	35
2015	113	171	145	177	153	219	373	120	48	33	49	138
n	28	34	34	27	29	29	35	35	27	22	35	24
2013-2015 average[b]	89	173	183	136	154	170	345	143	59	37	37	134

Months represented by "—" indicate periods where data were missing or incomplete.

[a] *only one baseline survey conducted during these months*

[b] *average is calculated as a weighted average to account for unequal sample sizes between years*

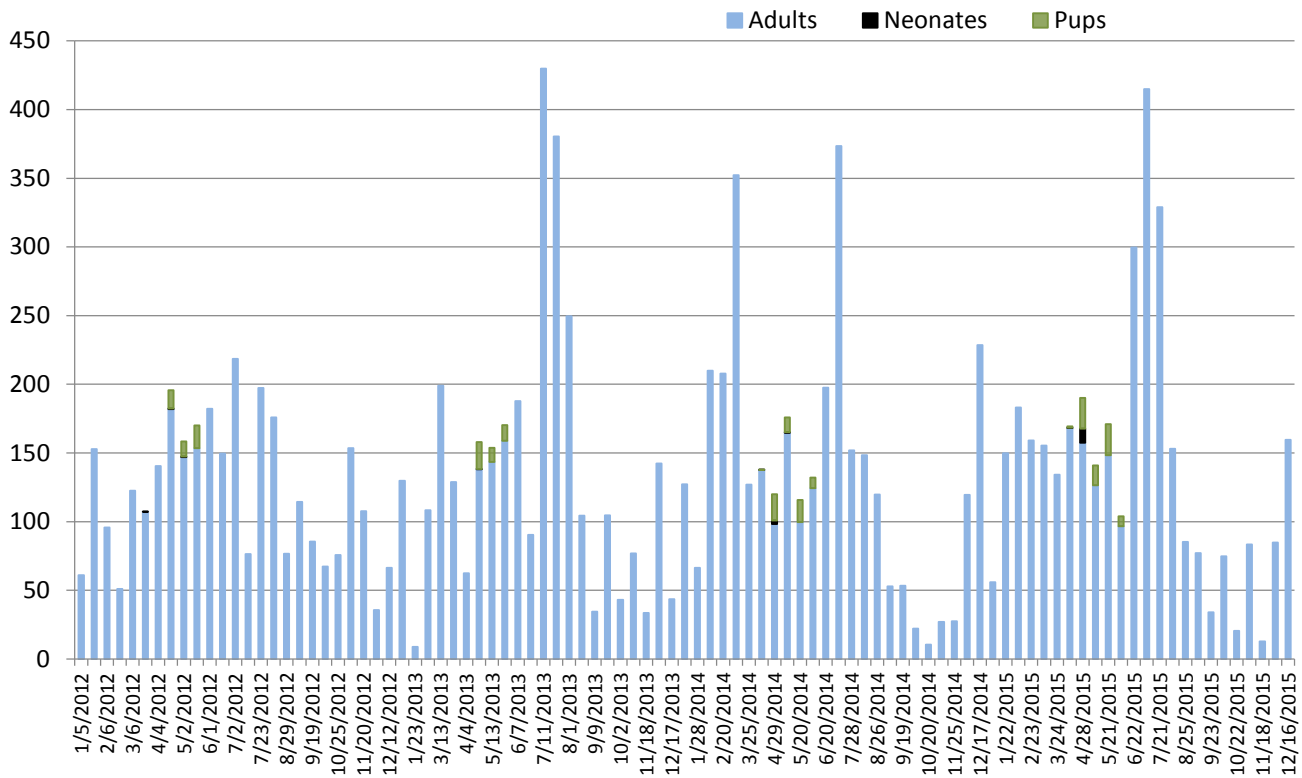

Figure 5. Mean number of harbor seals observed at the Jenner haul-out (Goat Rock State Beach) during Russian River Estuary Management Project baseline pinniped monitoring from January 2012 to December 2015. Pups are counted separately through June, after which all seals are counted as adults as it becomes more difficult to accurately age individuals.

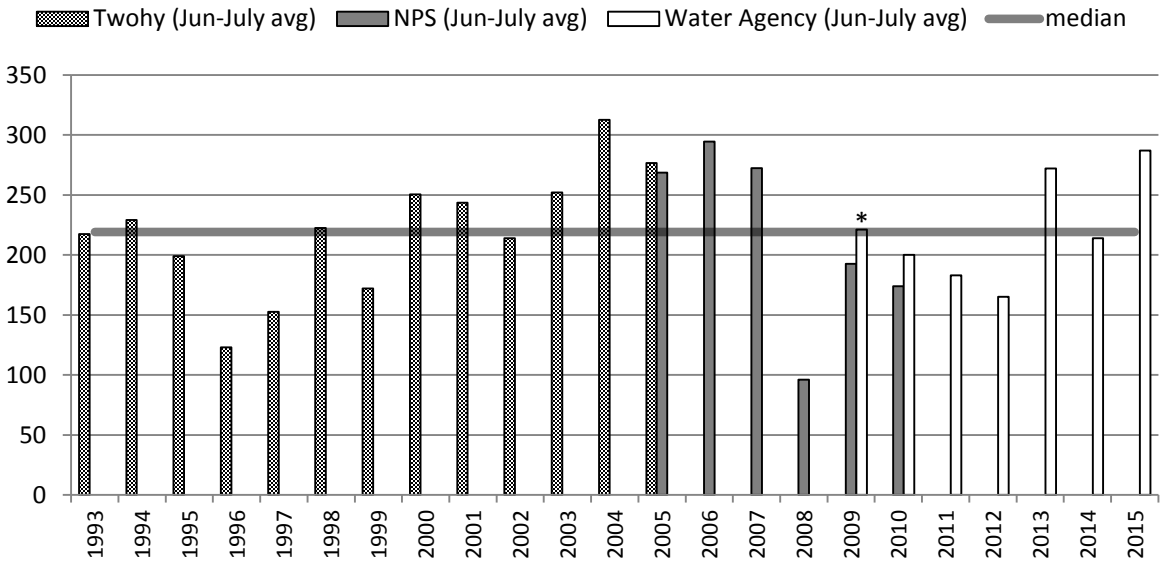

Figure 6. Average number of harbor seals observed at Jenner (Goat Rock State Beach), recorded during the molting season of June 1 – July 31 from 1993 to 2015. Adapted from Mortenson and Twohy 1994 and Elinor Twohy unpublished data, National Parks Service (NPS) Annual Reports 2005- 2010 and Water Agency monitoring surveys 2009-2015. * Water Agency 2009 data from July only.

Table 5. Average number of harbor seals observed at the Jenner haul-out (Goat Rock State Beach) during bar-closed conditions by month during Water Agency surveys (excluding during water level management activities) at the Jenner haul-out from 2009-2015; numbers reported are average number of seals hauled out by month.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2009-2015[a]	49	75	133	99	80	98	117	17[b]	30	28	32	59

[a] values have changed since previous permit application because additional observations from 2015 bar closed conditions were incorporated into monthly averages.

[b] no data available for bar closed conditions in August for Water Agency observations since 2009, average presented is from monitoring of artificial breaching activities from 1996 to 2000 (Merritt Smith Consulting 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000 and Sonoma County Water Agency and Merritt Smith Consulting 2001).

(4) A description of the status, distribution, and seasonal distribution (when applicable) of the affected species or stocks of marine mammals likely to be affected by such activities.

Pacific harbor seals-California stock. Pacific harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina richardsi*) range from Cedros Island (Baja California) along the Pacific coasts of the United States, Canada and Alaska, through the Aleutian Islands to the Pribilof Islands. In California, approximately 400-500 harbor seal haul-out sites are widely distributed along the mainland and on offshore islands, including intertidal sandbars, rocky shores and beaches (Hanan 1996). California harbor seals are not listed under the ESA or considered strategic under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).

Currently the California harbor seal population is estimated to be 30,968 with the minimum population estimated to be 27,348 (Carretta *et al.* 2015). Counts of harbor seals in California showed a rapid increase from approximately 1972 (when the MMPA was passed) to 1990. Net production rates appeared to decline from 1982 to 1994. Although earlier analyses were equivocal (Hanan 1996) and there has been no formal determination that the California stock has reached its Optimal Sustainable Population level (defined in the MMPA), the decrease in population growth rate has occurred at the same time as a decrease in human-caused mortality and may be an indication that the population is reaching its environmental carrying capacity (Carretta *et al.* 2012).

In general, harbor seals do not undertake long migrations, but do travel 150-300 km on occasion to find food or suitable breeding areas (Pitcher and McAllister 1981, Herder 1986, Gemmer 2002). Harbor seals are rarely found in pelagic waters and typically stay within the tidal and intertidal zones. On land, harbor seals haul out on rocky outcrops, mudflats, sandbars and sandy beaches with unrestricted access to water and with minimal human presence. Haul-out sites are important as resting sites for harbor seals. Harbor seals feed opportunistically in shallow waters on fish, crustaceans, and cephalopods. Foraging occurs in shallow littoral waters, and common prey items include flounder, sole, hake, codfish, sculpin, anchovy and herring (California Department of Fish and Game 2005). Harbor seals are typically solitary while foraging, although small groups have been observed.

Seasonal variation in the abundance of harbor seals at their haul-out locations is commonly observed throughout their range (Allen *et al*. 1989, Stewart and Yochem 1994, Gemmer 2002).

Peak haul-out abundance typically occurs during their annual molt, which occurs in mid-July in California. Abundance of seals on their haul-outs is also high during the pupping season when females come ashore to give birth. Pupping at the Russian River haul-out begins in March and pups are most abundant in mid-May. Seal abundance is lower during the fall and winter months when seals may spend more time foraging at sea and winter storms and low ambient temperatures make coming ashore less desirable.

Mortenson (1996) observed pups were first seen at the Jenner haul-out in late March, with maximum counts in May. In this study, pups were not counted separately from other age-classes at the haul-out after August due to the difficulty in discriminating pups from small yearlings (Mortenson 1996). Hanson (1993) observed during her study from August 1989 to July 1991 that pupping began at the Jenner haul-out in mid-April, with a maximum number of pups observed during the first two weeks of May. Water Agency monitors have observed newborn pups on Goat Rock State Beach as early as March 23rd (SCWA 2013). This corresponds with the peaks observed at Point Reyes, where the first viable pups are born around the first to second week of March and the peak is the last week of April to early May (J. Mortenson and S. Allen, personal communication). Pupping season is defined as March 15 to June 30 at the Jenner haul-out by the NMFS Incidental Harassment Authorization dated April 20, 2015.

Harbor seals have many haul-out sites in Northern California with approximately 6 primary mainland haul-out sites and possibly a total of 17 haul-out sites, if smaller areas are considered, in Sonoma County (Figure 7). The Russian River haul-out is the largest in Sonoma County, comprising approximately 18% of the harbor seal population found there (M. DeAngelis, personal communication). Harbor seals may also rest on logs and rock outcroppings in the Russian River estuary.

Monitoring efforts are particularly strong in the Point Reyes area, located in Marin County, south of Sonoma County, at the Russian River, and the Gualala River area (south near Sea Ranch) (Figure 8). Further north, seals are known to have numerous haul-out sites, but monitoring efforts are sparse in the stretch of coastline between the Gualala River area and Humboldt Bay (Figure 9).

Observations at the Jenner haul-out indicate that the number of seals present declined during bar closed (barrier beach closed) conditions (Mortenson 1996; SCWA 2013, 2014, 2015). The Water Agency's pinniped monitoring program that began in 2009 has included observations from water level management activities (*i.e.,* artificial breaching and lagoon outlet channel implementation) and its effects on the Jenner haul-out. Seal counts and disturbances were recorded from 1 to 2 days prior to a breaching or channel implementation event, the day of an event, and the day after an event (SCWA 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). During most events the trend observed was that harbor seal numbers declined during a beach closure (occasionally, the numbers rose again and then declined again during a closure) and increased the day following an artificial breaching event.

Figure 7. Pinniped Haulouts from Bodega Bay to Cuffey's Point, California Coast. Data includes haul-outs and rookeries surveyed using aerial or ground count methodologies and observations and monitoring results. Com_Name is the species common name. *Source*: California Pinniped Rookeries & Haul-out Sites. GIS public map. NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service Southwest Regional Office. http://www.swr.noaa.gov/psd/rookeryhaulouts/index.htm

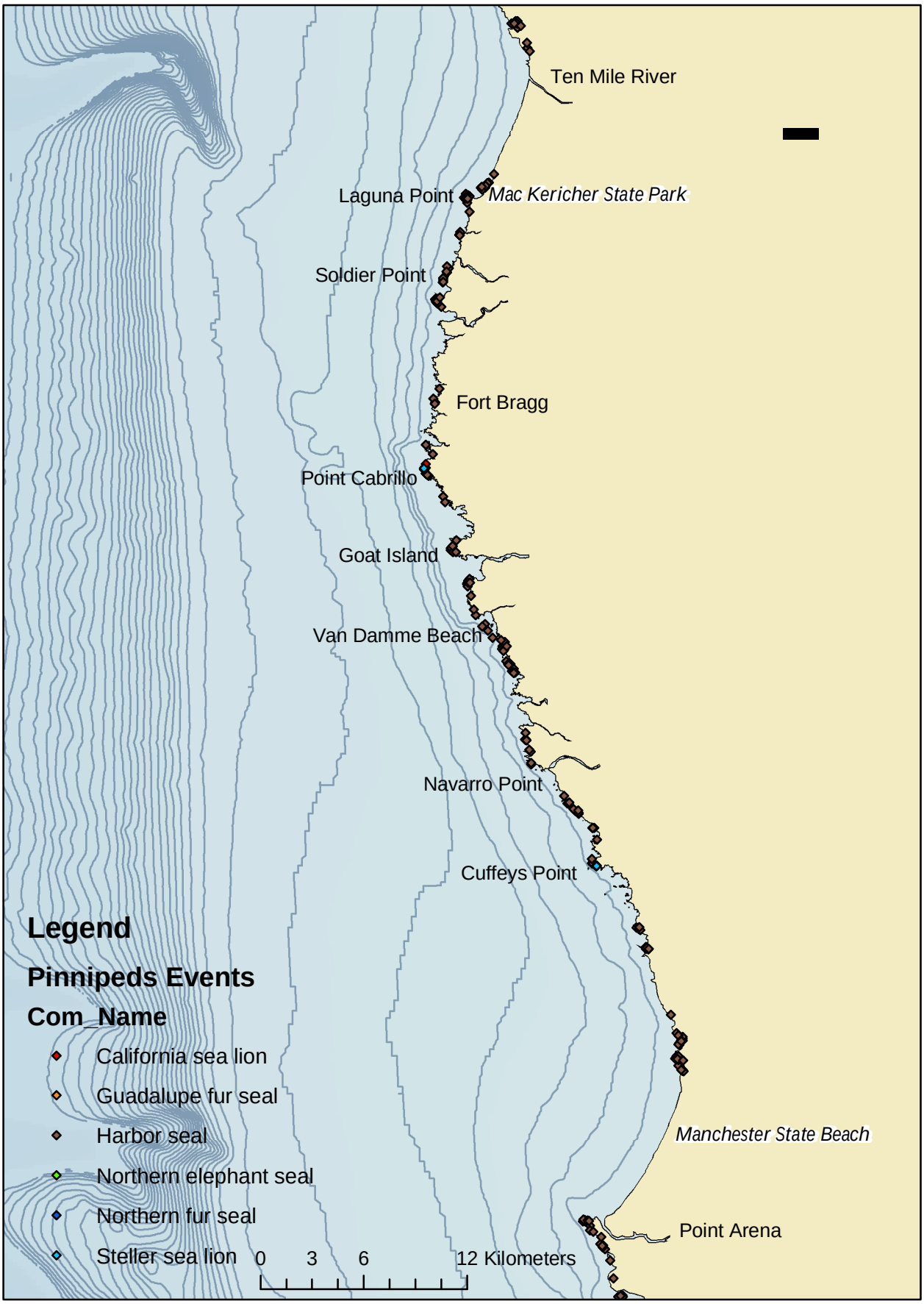

Figure 8. Pinniped Haulouts from Point Arena to Ten Mile River, California Coast. Data includes haul-outs and rookeries surveyed using aerial or ground count methodologies and observations and monitoring results. *Source*: California Pinniped Rookeries & Haul-out Sites. GIS public map. NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service Southwest Regional Office. http://www.swr.noaa.gov/psd/rookeryhaulouts/index.htm

Figure 9. Pinniped Haulouts from Caspar Point to Humboldt Bay, California Coast. Data includes haul-outs and rookeries surveyed using aerial or ground count methodologies and observations and monitoring results. *Source*: California Pinniped Rookeries & Haul-out Sites. GIS public map. NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service Southwest Regional Office. http://www.swr.noaa.gov/psd/rookeryhaulouts/index.htm

Joe Mortenson began his ongoing monthly seal counts at the Jenner haul-out and Bodega Rock in January 1987, with nearby haul-outs added to the counts thereafter. Elinor Twohy began daily counts of seals and people at the Jenner haul-out, including photographing the haul-out, on November 1, 1989. Her daily counts were taken at different times on successive days to determine if there were diurnal patterns in use of the haul-out (Mortenson and Twohy 1994). She also photographed and noted whether the mouth at the Jenner haul-out was opened or closed each day. Mortenson and Twohy (1994) previously reported that the Russian River haul-out is atypical in terms of the time of year that the peak numbers of harbor seals are present, reporting haul-out peaks in the late winter (February and March). Recent data from baseline monitoring conducted by the Water Agency and the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods indicated that these winter peaks in abundance are no longer occurring and that the Russian River haul-out is showing seasonal variation more similar to those reported elsewhere with a molting and pupping season peak (Figure 5) (SCWA 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015).

California sea lions-U.S. stock. California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*) range from southern Mexico to British Columbia, Canada. The entire U.S. population has been estimated at 296,750, with a minimum population size estimated to be 153,337 (Carretta *et al.* 2012). The population is estimated to be growing at a rate of approximately 5.4% annually between 1975 and 2008 (Carretta *et al.* 2012). The most recent count of pups made in 2011 totaled 61,943 seals and was the highest count to date. Estimates of total population size based on these counts are being developed (Carretta *et al.* 2015). The species is not listed under the Endangered Species Act and is not "depleted" or listed as "strategic" stock under the MMPA. Sea lions can be found at sea from the surf zone out to near shore and pelagic waters. On land, the sea lions are found resting and breeding in groups of various sizes, and haul out on rocky surfaces and outcroppings and beaches, as well as manmade structures such as jetties and docks. Sea lions prefer haul-out sites and rookeries near abundant food supplies, with easy access to water; although sea lions occasionally travel up rivers and bays in search of food.

Sea lions exhibit seasonal migration patterns organized around their breeding patterns. California sea lions breed at large rookeries on the Channel Islands in southern California, and on both sides of the Baja California peninsula, typically from May to August. Females tend to remain close to the rookeries throughout the year, while males migrate north after the breeding season in the late summer, and then migrate back south to the breeding grounds in the spring (California Department of Fish and Game 1990). No established rookeries are known north of Point Reyes, California, but large numbers of sub-adult and non-breeding or post-breeding male California sea lions are found throughout the Pacific Northwest. There is a seasonal pattern of peak numbers occurring in the northwest during fall, but local areas show high annual and seasonal variability.

Sea lions feed on fish and cephalopods, including Pacific whiting, rockfish, anchovy, hake, flat-fish, small sharks, squid, and octopus (California Department of Fish and Game 1990). Although solitary feeders, sea lions often hunt in groups, which can vary in size according to the abundance of prey (California Department of Fish and Game 1990).

California sea lions have been observed in and around the river mouth and in the Russian River estuary (Merritt Smith Consulting 1999,2000; SCWA and Merritt Smith Consulting 2001; SCWA 2012, 2013, 2014). Juvenile sea lions were observed from August to October of 2009 at Patty's Rock (Figure 1) by Water Agency staff and members of the public. Regular observation of juvenile sea lions were reported along the Sonoma Coast and in the Russian River estuary and were generally considered to be a result of poor foraging conditions in the ocean in 2009. Male California sea lions are occasionally observed hauled out at or near the Russian River mouth: once in August 2009, January and December 2011, January 2012, December 2013, February 2014. Other individuals were observed in the surf at the mouth of the river or swimming inside the estuary. These sightings in the winter months are more typical of male sea lions traveling along the western coast of North America outside of their breeding beaches. On two occasions in 2015 a juvenile sea lion was hauled out at the Russian River mouth: February 2 and April 8. Although these observations coincided with the 2013-2015 Unusual Mortality Event for California sea lion pups and yearlings[5], these individuals appeared to be in good physical condition.

Northern elephant seals – California stock. Northern elephant seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*) breed and give birth in California (U.S.) and Baja California (Mexico), primarily on offshore islands (Stewart *et al.* 1994), from December to March (Stewart and Huber 1993). Males feed near the eastern Aleutian Islands and in the Gulf of Alaska, and females feed further south, south of 45°N (Stewart and Huber 1993, Le Boeuf *et al.* 1993). Adults return to land between March and August to molt, with males returning later than females. Adults return to their feeding areas again between their spring/summer molting and their winter breeding seasons. Pups are born in early winter from December to January. Breeding occurs from December to March, and gestation lasts around 11 months. Northern elephant seals are polygamous; males establish dominance over large groups of females during the breeding season.

Populations of northern elephant seals in the U.S. and Mexico were all originally derived from a few tens or a few hundreds of individuals surviving in Mexico after being nearly hunted to extinction (Stewart *et al.* 1994). Given the very recent derivation of most rookeries, no genetic differentiation would be expected. Although movement and genetic exchange continues between rookeries, most elephant seals return to their natal rookeries when they start breeding (Huber *et al.* 1991). The California breeding population is now demographically isolated from the Baja California population and is considered to be a separate stock. Based on the 2010 survey an estimated 40,684 pups were born in California, resulting in a population estimate of 179,000 northern elephant seals (Carretta *et al.* 2015). Based on trends in pup counts the population is estimated to be growing at an annual rate of 3.8% since 1988 (Lowry *et al.* 2014).

Northern elephant seals range along the entire California coast (California Department of Fish and Game 2009). Adult male elephant seals breed with harems of females in from mid-December through March in dense rookeries on the San Miguel Island, Santa Barbara Island,

[5] http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/mmume/californiasealions2013.htm

San Nicolas Islands, San Simeon Island, Southeast Farallon Island, Año Nuevo Island, on the mainland at Año Nuevo (San Mateo Co.), and the Point Reyes Peninsula (California Department of Fish and Game 2001). From April to November, they feed at sea or haul out to molt at rookeries. They are not listed as "endangered" or "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act nor as "depleted" or “strategic” under the MMPA. Elephant seals feed at night in deep water, primarily on rays, sharks, pelagic squid, ratfish, and Pacific hake (California Department of Fish and Game 2009). Entanglement in marine debris, fishery interactions, and boat collisions are their main threats.

Censuses of pinnipeds at the mouth of the Russian River have been taken at least semimonthly since 1987. Elephant seals were noted from 1987 to 1991. From 1992-1995, one or two elephant seals were counted during the censuses conducted in May, with occasional records during the fall and winter (Mortenson and Follis 1997). A single male northern elephant seal was present at the mouth of the Russian River harbor seal haul-out site, during the late winter and spring for several years. The elephant seal was believed to be a juvenile or sub-adult male when it first began using the area as a haul-out site. It was observed harassing harbor seals hauled out at the mouth of the Russian River. A northern elephant seal sub-adult, tagged R-1 by Dr. Sarah Allen in August 2003, was present at the Jenner haul-out from 2002 to 2007. He was generally present during molt and again from late December through March into the early pupping season. In recent years a single sub-adult elephant seal (not known to be the same individual) was observed hauled out at the Russian River in the late summer in 2013 and 2014, prior to that the latest reported sighting was in June 2009.

(5) The type of incidental taking authorization that is being requested (i.e., takes by harassment only; takes by harassment, injury and/or death) and the method of incidental taking.

This is a request for an incidental harassment authorization (IHA, Level B harassment) of harbor seals, California sea lions, and northern elephant seals at the Russian River, in Sonoma County, California. The type of take expected is incidental harassment of pinnipeds from the activities associated with estuary management, which includes people, vehicles, and heavy equipment on the beach near the haul-out and activities in the Russian River estuary near river haul-out locations. Activities may include: excavation and maintenance of the lagoon outlet channel, construction of a pilot channel during artificial breaching events, posting and removal of warning signs on the beach, monitoring the lagoon outlet channel, monthly topographic surveys of the sandbar at the mouth of the estuary, boat operation associated with flow circulation and water quality monitoring, and beach-seining and boat operation associated with biological monitoring near haul-out locations.

(6) By age, sex, and reproductive condition (if possible), the number of marine mammals (by species) that may be taken by each type of taking identified in paragraph (a)(5) of this section, and the number of times such takings by each type of taking are likely to occur.

The estimates of the number of Pacific harbor seals that may be harassed by the proposed water level management activities is based upon the number of potential take events associated with Lagoon Outlet Channel and artificial breaching activities (Table 3) and the average number of harbor seals that are present at the Jenner haul-out during bar-closed conditions (Table 5). The numbers of take events associated with lagoon outlet channel management are split into two categories: 1) initial channel excavation, which would likely occur between May and September, and 2) maintenance and monitoring of the outlet channel, which would continue until October 15th. Recent observations indicate that seals continue to use the Jenner haul-out during bar closed conditions, while there is some evidence that increased human interactions during these conditions will reduce the average number of seals hauled out (SCWA 2014, 2015). Based on Water Agency pinniped monitoring from 2009 to 2015, the average number of harbor seals hauled out during barrier beach-closed conditions (Table 5) can be used to estimate the number of individuals that may be harassed by both lagoon outlet channel and artificial breaching activities. Both activities would likely be implemented soon after a beach closure (within 14 days), so the data presented in Table 5 would be reasonable for the take estimates. Because the lagoon outlet channel implementation dates cannot be determined yet (they are dependent on when the barrier beach naturally closes after May 15th), the highest average number of harbor seals during the Lagoon Management Period presented in Table 5 was used to estimate the number of seals that may be taken during implementation of the lagoon outlet channel. For maintenance and monitoring activities associated with the lagoon outlet channel, the monthly average of harbor seals during bar closed conditions was used (Table 5). Table 6 provides detailed take estimates.

In previous years, for monthly topographic surveys of the barrier beach it was estimated that only a small percentage (10%) of harbor seals hauled out would be disturbed by this activity. During these surveys two Water Agency personnel walked along the barrier beach with a survey rod. A pinniped monitor positioned at the Highway 1 Overlook in Jenner (Figure 2) would notify the surveyors via radio when any seals on the haul-out began to alert to their presence. At this time the surveyors retreated slowly away from the haul-out typically resulting in little to no disturbance. However, in our effort to reduce or eliminate disturbance to seals during these surveys the topographic maps created often excluded the area of the barrier beach nearest the river mouth. The resulting maps were of little use to the Water Agency and NMFS in planning water level management activities. Starting on May 30, 2013, the survey crew began mapping the entire barrier beach as needed to inform management decisions. Due to this change in survey protocol the amount of seals disturbed will no longer be estimated as a percentage of seals hauled out, but as a three year average for the month based on the number of seals recorded by the Water Agency from 2013 to 2015 (Table 4). Future topographic surveys of the barrier beach will continue in this manner, with the exception of surveys during times when neonates are present on the beach. When neonates are present survey crews will coordinate with the marine mammal monitor to reduce disturbance to seals and avoid flushing seals from their haul-out.

The majority of the biological monitoring of the estuary occurs away from the main harbor seal haul-out; however boats are driven past small (peripheral) resting areas on logs, rocks and sand

bars in the estuary. The estimate for seal disturbance for these activities is based on the assumption that one seal would be encountered during each of these sampling events (Tables 3 and 6). For the river mouth haul-out, the estimate for harbor seal disturbance is based on the monthly average reported from 2013 to 2015 in Table 4.
The estimated potential total number of individual animals that may be taken equates to the average number of seals of each species anticipated to be encountered per event multiplied by the estimated number of events during the term of the IHA. The potential total number of individual animals that may be taken is likely an overestimate because the same seals would presumably be taken multiple times throughout the season (Table 6).

California sea lions and northern elephant seals are occasional visitors to the estuary. Based on the small amount of observations we have for these species we estimate that there is a potential to encounter one adult or sub-adult animal (per species) per month throughout the year (Table 6).

Based on the estimate of activities to occur in 2016 and the average number of pinnipeds expected to occur we are requesting take authorization for incidental (level B) harassment of 4,464 Pacific harbor seals, 36 California sea lions and 36 northern elephant seals. Since harbor seals are not distinguished by age class throughout the year we are unable to divide our take estimate by age and we estimate that the majority of animals encountered are greater than one year old. For California sea lions and northern elephant seals we have not previously observed mature females of these species at the Russian River so we expect the individuals likely to be encountered would be adult or sub-adult males and juveniles of either sex.

(7) The anticipated impact of the activity upon the species or stock.

The anticipated impacts of the estuary management activities are temporary disturbances caused by the presence of staff and equipment, and associated noise, on the beach near the Jenner haul-out, and operation of boats and deployment of beach seines near river haul-outs. The Water Agency counted seals hauled out and monitored disturbances before, during, and after breaching events from 1996 to 2000 (Merritt-Smith Consulting 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000; SCWA and Merritt Smith Consulting 2001) and since 2009 (SCWA 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). Seals at the Jenner haul-out responded most negatively to human disturbances on the beach (typically beach visitors approaching the haul-out and the presence of Water Agency crews and equipment near the haul-out). During breaching events harbor seals alerted to the sound of equipment on the beach and left the haul-out as the crew and equipment approached closer on the beach. When breaching activities were conducted south of the haul-out location seals often remained on the beach during all or some of the breaching activity. This indicates that seals are less disturbed by activities when equipment and crew do not pass directly past their haul-out (SCWA 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015).

Stampeding or dead pups have not been observed during monitoring of the Water Agency's artificial breaching activities. Implementation of the lagoon outlet channel, as required by NMFS' Russian River Biological Opinion, has occurred on a single event (July 8, 2010), and the

potential direct effects on harbor seals and their pups was similar to artificial breaching activities as construction methods are similar.

More specific data on the behavior of harbor seals during artificial breaching activities, specifically their responses to disturbance, are available in Merritt Smith Consulting (1997, 1998, 1999 and 2001) and SCWA and Merritt Smith Consulting (2001), and the annual data reports for NMFS IHA (SCWA 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015). Mortenson (1996) also discusses harbor seal behavior during the time pups are present. To date water level management activities have occurred outside the harbor seal pupping season so the annual NMFS IHA data reports do not describe pup behavioral responses to Water Agency activities. In April of 2015 a scheduled breaching activity was canceled due to the presence of neonatal harbor seals on the beach.

The opportunity for mother-pup bonding at the Jenner haul-out is not expected to be impacted by implementation of the lagoon outlet channel or artificial breaching activities. The majority of pups are born by mid-May in most years (SCWA 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015), and implementation of the lagoon outlet channel would begin around May 15th (as required by the Russian River Biological Opinion). By this time, it is expected that bonding between mothers and pups would have likely occurred. The number of artificial breaching activities during the months of March, April and May has been relatively low in the past (Table 1), and the breaching activities occur in a single day over several hours. Artificial breaching activities are not expected to impact mother-pup bonding. The proposed project would incorporate the mitigation measures included in the NMFS IHA, including limiting access to the beach during the pupping season (March 15 to June 30) as follows:

- If a pup less than one week old is on the beach where heavy machinery would be used or on the path used to access the work location, the breaching event will be delayed until the pup has left the site or the latest day possible to prevent flooding while still maintaining suitable fish rearing habitat. Pups less than one week old should be characterized by being up to 15 kg, thin for their body length, or an umbilicus or natal pelage is present. The Water Agency will coordinate with the locally established seal monitoring program (SealWatch) to determine if pups less than one week old are on the beach prior to a breaching event;
- A water level management event may not occur for more than two consecutive days unless flooding threats cannot be controlled;
- The Water Agency will maintain a one week (7 day) “no work” period between water level management events (unless flooding is a threat to the low-lying residential community) to allow for adequate disturbance recovery period. During the “no-work” period, equipment must be removed from the beach; and
- Physical and biological monitoring, as described in Table 2, will not be conducted if a pup less than one week old is present at the monitoring site or on a path to the site.

Table 6. Estimated number of pinnipeds that may be affected (Level B harassment) by Russian River estuary management activities.

Species	No. Animals Expected to Occur[a]	No. Take Events[b]	Potential Total Number of Individual Animals that may be Taken[c, d]
Lagoon Outlet Channel Management on the Sandbar (May 15 to October 15)			
Pacific harbor seal[e]	Implementation: 117 Maintenance & Monitoring: May-80; June-98; July-117; Aug-17; Sept-30; Oct-28	Implementation (May-Sept): 3 Maintenance May -1; June-Sept-4 per month;Oct-1 Monitoring (June-Sept-2 per month; Oct-1	Implementation: 351 Maintenance: 1,156 Monitoring: 552 TOTAL: 2,059
California sea lion (potential to encounter once per month May-Oct)	1	6	6
Northern elephant seal (potential to encounter once per month May-Oct)	1	6	6
Artificial Breaching on the Sandbar (October 16 to May 14)			
Pacific harbor seal[e]	Oct: 28 Nov: 32 Dec: 59 Jan: 49 Feb: 75 Mar: 133 Apr: 99 May: 80	Oct: 2[f] Nov: 2 Dec: 2 Jan: 1 Feb: 1 Mar: 1 Apr: 1 May: 2 12 events maximum	Oct: 56 Nov: 64 Dec: 118 Jan: 49 Feb: 75 Mar: 133 Apr: 99 May: 160 TOTAL: 754
California sea lion (potential to encounter once per month Oct-May)	1	8	8
Northern elephant seal (potential to encounter once per month Oct-May)	1	8	8
<u>Biological and Physical Habitat Monitoring in the Estuary</u>			
Topographic Survey of the Barrier Beach			
Pacific harbor seal[g]	Jan: 89 Feb: 173 Mar: 183 Apr: 136 May: 154 June: 170 July: 345 Aug: 143 Sept: 59 Oct: 37 Nov: 37 Dec: 134	12	Jan: 89 Feb: 173 Mar: 18[h] Apr: 14[h] May: 15[h] June: 170 July: 345 Aug: 143 Sept: 59 Oct: 37 Nov: 37 Dec: 134 TOTAL: 1,234

Species	No. Animals Expected to Occur[a]	No. Take Events[b]	Potential Total Number of Individual Animals that may be Taken[c, d]
California sea lion (potential to encounter once per month)	1	12	12
Northern elephant seal (potential to encounter once per month)	1	12	12
Biological and Physical Habitat Monitoring in the Estuary			
Pacific harbor seal[i]	1	165	165
California sea lion (potential to encounter once per month May-Dec)	1	8	8
Northern elephant seal (potential to encounter once per month May-Dec)	1	8	8
Investigations of Goat Rock Jetty Structure and Ground Water Seepage			
Pacific harbor seal[g]	July: 345 Aug: 143 Sept: 59 Oct: 37 Nov: 37 Dec: 134	2	252[j]
California sea lion	1	2	2
Northern elephant seal	1	2	2

[a] Number of animals expected to occur during bar closed conditions differ from previous permit applications due to the addition of observations from 2015, see Table 5. This has changed the total take estimates since the previous permit application.

[b] For implementation of the lagoon outlet channel, an event is defined as a single, 2-day episode. It is assumed that the same individual seals would be hauled out during a single event. For the remaining activities, an event is defined as a single day on which an activity occurs. Some events may include multiple activities listed in Table 3.

[c] The estimated potential total number of individual animals that may be taken equates to the maximum number of seals of each species anticipated to be encountered per event multiplied by the estimated number of events during the term of the IHA.

[d] The potential total number of individual animals that may be taken is likely an overestimate because the same seal would likely be taken multiple times throughout the season.

[e] Number of seals expected to occur based on monthly averages of seals during bar closed conditions as presented in Table 5.

[f] The number of events is the monthly average number of bar closure events from 1996 to 2015 (Table 1). Based on number of events, the maximum number of artificial breaching events would be 15. The average number of breaching events from 1996 to 2015 is 5 events/year.

[g] Number of seals expected to occur based on 2013-2015 monthly averages in Table 4.

[h] The potential number of individual animals that may be taken was calculated at 10% of the population expected to be present at the river mouth for a given month during the period where neonates are possibly present. This figure was chosen based on the fact that if neonates are on the beach the survey crew will retreat away from the haul-out at the first sign that seals are alert to their presence. Outside of this time, it is assumed that the entire haul out will be disturbed in order to completely map the barrier beach.

[i] Number of harbor seals expected to occur is one per event, events listed in Table 3.

[j] The number of harbor seals expected to be disturbed was calculated from the average of seals for months July – December, (since the exact timing of well removal is unknown) multiplied by 2 since well removal is expected to last two days.

Excavation of the lagoon outlet channel may require the presence of Water Agency crews and equipment on the beach for up to 2 consecutive days. There have been several breaching events that required up to 2 days of work with a bulldozer or excavator without any apparent long-term impacts to the presence of seals at the haul-out. Seals at the Jenner haul-out experience regular disturbance by beach visitors and continual noise from the adjacent Highway 1 and would likely only be temporarily disturbed by the presence of Water Agency crews over a 2-day period. However, it is difficult to predict the response to the presence of up to 2 pieces of heavy equipment on the beach during the initial construction of the outlet channel. Monitoring of the pinniped response to this disturbance is included under question 13 below.

During both summer lagoon outlet channel management and artificial breaching activities, Water Agency crews would approach the haul-out ahead of the heavy equipment to minimize the potential for flushes to result in a stampede, a particular concern during pupping season. Water Agency staff would avoid walking or driving equipment through the haul-out. Crews on foot would take caution to approach the haul-out slowly and to make an effort to be seen from a distance, if possible, rather than appearing suddenly at the top of the beach. Seals are usually alerted to the presence of the heavy equipment on the barrier beach well before it approaches the haul-out due to the equipment's noise. Equipment would be driven slowly on the beach and care would be taken to minimize the number of shut-downs and start-ups when the equipment is on the beach. During the Water Agency's monitoring since 2009 harbor seals typically leave the haul-out prior to the excavator reaching the breaching location due to the presence of crews arriving on foot. Once breaching was completed, equipment and crews left the beach and pinnipeds returned to the haul-out soon after.

(8) The anticipated impact of the activity on the availability of the species or stocks of marine mammals for subsistence uses.

Not applicable.

(9) The anticipated impact of the activity upon the habitat of the marine mammal populations, and the likelihood of restoration of the affected habitat.

The purposes of the lagoon outlet channel management and artificial breaching activities are to manage the barrier beach at Goat Rock State Beach to improve summer rearing habitat for juvenile salmonids in the Russian River estuary and to minimize potential flood risk to low-lying properties on the estuary, respectively. These activities would result in physical alterations of the Jenner haul-out. When the barrier beach closes, water surface elevations in the estuary rise resulting in the haul-out increasing in elevation on the beach and flooding of haul-outs in the Russian River. For the summer lagoon outlet channel, elevations would range between 4 and 9 ft NGVD with a target of 7 ft. For artificial breaching activities, the sandbar would be breached when water surface elevations ranged from 4.5 and 7 ft NGVD.

The lagoon outlet channel would alter the beach by creating a shallow outlet channel that would convey river flow to pass over the sandbar and minimize or eliminate tidal exchange from May 15th to October 15th.[6] The gentle slope of the outlet channel would allow seals to travel through the channel, although the shallow depths (0.5 to 2 ft.) would likely not allow for swimming through the channel. Depending on the barrier beach height and the location of the river's thalweg when the beach closes, part of the outlet channel may be constructed in areas where seals typically haul out on the estuary side. The outlet channel would be maintained from May 15th to October 15th. After October 15th, the closed barrier beach would be artificially breached when water surface elevations in the estuary approach 7.0 feet NGVD as read at the Jenner visitor's center. Artificial breaching activities alter the habitat by creating a pilot channel through the closed sandbar. The location of the pilot channel is dependent on the height and width of the sandbar and the location of the river's thalweg. The pilot channel could be constructed in areas where seals typically haul out. Construction of the lagoon outlet channel and artificial breaching pilot channels requires excavated sand to be side cast on the beach. Any sand excavated would be side cast on the adjacent beach in such a way as to minimize changes to beach topography. During implementation and maintenance of the lagoon outlet channel, side cast sand would be graded on the adjacent beach and/or placed within the wave run-up zone on the beach so it is redistributed on the beach. During artificial breaching, the excavated sand is side cast adjacent to the pilot channel because it will be scoured as the mouth opens with flows leaving the estuary.

[6] The lagoon management period is May 15th to October 15th, as described in the Russian River Biological Opinion (NMFS 2008).

During the Water Agency's pinniped monitoring associated with artificial breaching activities from 1996 to 2000, the number of harbor seals hauled out at Goat Rock State Beach declined when the barrier beach closed (although the initial decline was often observed to be followed by a brief increase in the number of seals at the haul-out) and then increased the day following an artificial breaching event (Merritt-Smith Consulting 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000; SCWA and Merritt Smith Consulting 2001, SCWA 2011). Our recent observations of seal haul-out abundance during barrier beach closed conditions and associated with artificial breaching activities follow the previously described trends (SCWA 2014, 2015, 2016). Recently we have gained more information regarding the number of pinnipeds that use the haul-out during extended sandbar closure in the lagoon management period (May 15th to October 15th). In 2015 the barrier beach was closed for a total of 49 days during the lagoon management period, with the longest closure lasting 27 days in September and October (SCWA 2016). Generally, fewer seals were hauled out during closure events compared to bar open conditions. However, the monthly average number of seals hauled out did not differ significantly from previous years (SCWA 2016). Results are similar for barrier beach closures during the lagoon management period in 2013 and 2014 (SCWA 2014, 2015). While there were fewer seals hauled out during closed conditions, the monthly average of seal abundance during September and October did not vary significantly from previous years combined (SCWA 2016, 2015). Collection of baseline information during the lagoon management period would be included in the monitoring described under question 13 below. The Water Agency's previous monitoring, as well as Twohy's daily counts of seals at the sandbar (Table 4), indicates that the number of seals at the haul-out declines from August to October, so management of the lagoon outlet channel would have little effect on haul-out use. The late spring and early summer (May, June, and July), may be the most sensitive time period for pinniped disturbance since it coincides with pupping and the likely initiation of lagoon management (following a closure in this time period). In 2013 prolonged closures occurred in late spring and early summer (8 to 25 days). The average number of pinnipeds at the haul-out ranged from 50 to 96 harbor seals over the course of the barrier beach closures (SCWA 2014). This indicates that seals present at the haul-out during the pupping season are unlikely to completely abandon the haul-out from May to July in the event a seasonal lagoon is maintained. During closure event seals are routinely observed travelling across the barrier beach between the estuary and the ocean. Based on these monitoring results, the numbers of seals hauled out from May through July would be expected to fluctuate, but it is likely that the haul-out would continue to be used by harbor seals. In April 2015 the barrier beach was closed for 8 days during the peak pupping period and the number of pups observed was similar to previous years when the mouth remained open at this time (SCWA 2016).

Monitoring of the of the ground water seepage monitoring wells on the barrier beach at Goat Rock State Park for the jetty study will take place south of the jetty wall and therefore will not alter the beach where pinnipeds are typically found (Figure 4). These wells are capped and buried below the sand in an effort to limit any human interference with the wells and to minimize their physical impact on the beach. Monitoring wells will be removed in 2016. Removal of the wells will included the use of an 8" hollow stem auger, but any alteration of the beach will be temporary and activities are expected to last two days. The beach surface will be

restored to existing conditions and no outside material will be used at the site. Biological and water quality monitoring would not physically alter pinniped habitat.

(10) The anticipated impact of the loss or modification of the habitat on the marine mammal populations involved.

The modifications of habitat described previously under question 9 would be temporary. The Russian River estuary management activities are anticipated to have minimal effects on the overall habitat of California stocks of Pacific harbor seal and northern elephant seal, and the U.S. stock of California sea lion. Habitat modification effects would be limited to the Jenner haul-out at the mouth of the Russian River.

Changes in haul-out elevation regularly occur with the tides at this site and any habitat that would be impacted by side cast sand would be temporary. Seals would still have access to the estuary lagoon waters and could still flush into the water during high water surface elevation periods. Modification of habitat resulting from construction of the lagoon outlet channel or artificial breaching pilot channel would also be temporary in nature. Harbor seals are regularly observed crossing overland from the Pacific Ocean to haul out on the estuary side of the beach, even in bar-open conditions, so it is anticipated that seals would continue to use the haul-out in bar-closed, lagoon conditions.

(11) The availability and feasibility (economic and technological) of equipment, methods, and manner of conducting such activity or other means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact upon the affected species or stocks, their habitat, and on their availability for subsistence uses, paying particular attention to rookeries, mating grounds, and areas of similar significance.

During both summer lagoon outlet channel management and artificial breaching activities, Water Agency crews would approach the haul-out ahead of the heavy equipment to minimize the potential for flushes to result in a stampede. Water Agency staff would avoid walking or driving equipment through the haul-out. Crews on foot would take caution to approach the haul-out slowly and to make an effort to be seen from a distance, if possible, rather than appearing suddenly at the top of the sandbar. Seals are usually alerted to the presence of the heavy equipment on the sandbar well before it approaches the haul-out due to the equipment's noise. Equipment would be driven slowly on the beach and care would be taken to minimize the number of shut-downs and start-ups when the equipment is on the beach to reduce disturbance of seals from loud noises following a relatively quiet period. All work, including monitoring, would be completed as efficiently as possible, with the fewest number of heavy equipment possible, to minimize disturbance of seals at the haul-out. Boats operating near river haul-outs would be kept within posted speed limits and driven as far from the haul-outs as safely possible to minimize flushing seals.

(12) Where the proposed activity would take place in or near a traditional Arctic subsistence hunting area and/or may affect the availability of a species or stock of marine mammal for

Arctic subsistence uses, the applicant must submit either a plan of cooperation or information that identifies what measures have been taken and/or would be taken to minimize any adverse effects on the availability of marine mammals for subsistence uses.

Not applicable

(13) The suggested means of accomplishing the necessary monitoring and reporting that would result in increased knowledge of the species, the level of taking or impacts on populations of marine mammals that are expected to be present while conducting activities and suggested means of minimizing burdens by coordinating such reporting requirements with other schemes already applicable to persons conducting such activity. Monitoring plans should include a description of the survey techniques that would be used to determine the movement and activity of marine mammals near the activity site(s) including migration and other habitat uses, such as feeding.

In an effort to maximize efficiency and focus monitoring efforts in order to gain new insights, the Water Agency is proposing modifications to the 2011 Pinniped Monitoring Plan. Details of the revised monitoring plan are included in the attached document (Sonoma County Water Agency and the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods 2016) but the main goal of the revision is to focus monitoring efforts on the Jenner haul-out, where the majority of pinnipeds in the Russian River area are found, to continue to develop our understanding of the physical and biological factors that influence seal abundance and behavior. The modifications proposed include increasing the frequency of surveys at the Jenner haul-out from twice a month to four times a month and reducing the duration of each survey from eight to four hours. Visits to the peripheral haul-outs would be eliminated except in the case that a lagoon outlet channel is constructed and maintained for a prolonged period (over 21 days). Annual reports to the NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources will continue to specifically address the four questions identified in the plan. The following paragraphs describe how the proposed protocol changes will affect our ability to address the questions going forward.

In regard to the first question: “Under what conditions do pinnipeds haul out at the Russian River estuary mouth at Jenner?”, we have been able to describe some physical and temporal factors that influence seals abundance at Jenner. Proposed changes to the protocol will allow us to continue monitoring these factors and observe if there are changes over time. Furthermore, by increasing the frequency of surveys we would be able to observe the influence of physical changes that do not persist for more than 10 days, like brief periods of barrier beach closures or other environmental changes.

In regard to the second question: “How do seals at the Jenner haul-out respond to activities associated with the construction and maintenance of the lagoon outlet channel and artificial breaching activities?”, we have collected many observation that describe how seals respond directly to breaching activities, and will continue to record and report these responses under the proposed protocol. Because a lagoon outlet channel has not yet been constructed and maintained, we have been unable to describe how seals response to activities associated with

the construction and maintenance of a lagoon outlet channel. Should such an opportunity arise we would be able to monitor any seal response under the proposed protocol.

In regard to the third question: “Does the number of seals at the Jenner haul-out significantly differ from historic averages with formation of a summer (May 15th to October 15th) lagoon in the Russian River estuary?”, Because a lagoon outlet channel has not yet been constructed and maintained, we have been unable to address this question. However, under the proposed changes we will continue to count seals at Jenner and would be able to compare the abundance of seals over time and with historic averages.

In regard to the fourth question: “Are seals at the Jenner haul-out displaced to nearby river and coastal haul-outs when the mouth remains closed in the summer?”, after five years of surveys we have no evidence that seals are displaced to the peripheral sites during periods of mouth closures in the summer. Because a lagoon outlet channel has not yet been constructed and maintained our only evidence comes from data collected during natural barrier beach closures during the May 15th to October 15th period. While there are small and short-term increases in seal abundance at the coastal haul-outs during and immediately after a breaching event, seal abundance at the peripheral sites remain low throughout the year regardless of river mouth condition. Peripheral sites are composed of small near shore rocks and out-crops or exposed logs in the river and are not likely to accommodate the hundreds of seals observed during the summer months at Jenner. Due to this limitation of haul-out size, only a relatively small number of seals could be displaced to any one of the peripheral sites. The most accurate way to determine if small numbers of seals have moved from Jenner to a peripheral site would be to monitor the movement of individual seals. In order to accomplish this, seals would need to be uniquely marked and re-sighted. Natural markings would be a non-invasive method to identify individual seals using photo identification techniques, but this is very labor intensive and therefore too costly for us to consider at this time. Proposed changes to the baseline monitoring would allow us to focus efforts on the Jenner haul-out where the majority of seals along the Sonoma Coast are concentrated.

In addition to maintaining our ability to address the questions outlined in the original Pinniped Monitoring Plan, the proposed changes will improve our ability to describe how seals respond to barrier beach closures and will allow us to more accurately estimate the number of harbor seal pups born at Jenner each year. Under the current protocol we have had two main challenges. First, we have few observations of the Jenner haul-out under closed mouth conditions compared to open mouth conditions. Increasing the frequency of surveys at Jenner would allow us to collect more baseline counts during closed-mouth conditions and would therefore increase the robustness of our comparisons. Second, our observations of the Jenner haul-out during pupping season does not currently provide an accurate way to estimate the total number of pups born each year. Increasing the frequency of surveys would allow us to more accurately describe the start and end of the pupping season. The proposed changes would also allow us the opportunity to count pups as newborns (within seven days of birth), leasing to better estimates of natality that could be compared to other local harbor seal rookeries.

(14) Suggested means of learning of, encouraging, and coordinating research opportunities, plans, and activities relating to reducing such incidental taking and evaluating its effects.

All pinniped data collected during the Russian River estuary management activities at the Russian River would be made available to NMFS, California Department of Parks and Recreation, the Stewards of the Coasts and Redwoods, and to the general public.

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