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RE: Comments for the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board's 2008 303(d) List of Water Quality Limited Segments

Dear North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board:

On behalf of Russian Riverkeeper (RRK), I welcome the opportunity to submit these comments on the Public Review Draft 2008 303(d) list of impaired waters. Riverkeeper commends the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (Regional Board) staff's proposed additions to the 2008 303(d) list and strongly urges the Regional Board to endorse these additions of these water quality impaired segments to the 2008 303(d) list.

In the Russian River watershed, RRK supports Regional Board staff's recommended additions to the 303(d) list. Specifically, RRK strongly supports the following listings:

- Laguna de Santa Rosa – Indicator Bacteria
- Green Valley Creek – Indicator Bacteria and Dissolved Oxygen
- Russian River HU, Lower Russian River HA, Guerneville HAS – DDT

Readily available data, as included in your 303(d)/305(b) Integrated Report Supporting Information, strongly supports these proposed listings. Data collected from the Russian River First Flush sampling events provide a preponderance of evidence to place Laguna de Santa Rosa and Green Valley Creek as impaired by indicator bacteria on the 2008 303(d) list. Indicator bacteria raise the risk of waterborne diseases ranging in severity from ear infections to gastroenteritis to hepatitis A. Excessive indicator bacteria can signal the presence of excess organic material that can also starve fish of oxygen they need to survive, of which there is evidence in Green Valley Creek, which Regional Board staff have also recommended be listed as impaired for dissolved oxygen, a listing which RRK also strongly supports.

Indicator bacteria in these water bodies impedes the ability of Californians to enjoy water contact recreation in the Russian River watershed, and dissolved oxygen impairment in Green Valley Creek severely threatens cold freshwater habitat aquatic life uses including fish migration and spawning, and the preservation of rare and endangered species.

Regional Board staff's proposal to place the Lower Russian River on the 2008 303(d) list as impaired for DDT is strongly supported by State data collected through the State Water Board's Surface Water Ambient Monitoring Program (SWAMP). RRK strongly agrees with this proposal, and urges the Regional Board to take swift action with an aggressive TMDL to remediate this severe impairment which threatens the public health and welfare of Russian River valley residents by compromising the safety of domestic and municipal water supplies, such as the Sweetwater Springs Water District wells, with DDT, a recognized carcinogen, and developmental and reproductive toxicant.

RRK welcomes the opportunity to comment here on an existing North Coast 303(d) listing and associated TMDL completion date. Through communication with Santa Rosa-based Friends of Mark West Creek, RRK has learned that temperature and sediment impairment on the 303(d)-listed Mark West Creek has only worsened since being placed on the 303(d) list in 2002 as impaired by sediment and temperature. Currently, the TMDL schedule estimates that temperature and sediment impairment on Mark West Creek will be remediated through a TMDL by 2019. Given the accelerating rate of vineyard conversion on the Mark West Creek Watershed, RRK believes that delaying the Mark West Creek TMDL until 2019 will result in even more severe sediment and temperature impairment in this critical cold freshwater habitat.

Over the years, the Upper Mark West watershed has repeatedly been recognized as an area with exceptional natural resources, where opportunities for conservation are abundant and valuable. In 1973, a group of students from Sonoma State University published a study titled "The Preservation of Mark West Creek." The study identified Upper Mark West as the most natural, pristine watershed draining to the Laguna de Santa Rosa. The 1979 Franz Valley Specific Plan notes the unique value of wildlife and fishery habitat in the Mark West watershed and surrounding areas. In 2008, the Upper Mark West watershed was designated a Priority Conservation Area by the San Francisco Bay area joint agency coalition FOCUS, as well as by the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) because of its decreasing instream flows and degraded water quality. This designation indicates that the area is one of regional significance that provides important natural resources, ecological values and ecosystem functions. The designation also indicates an urgent need for protection. It should be noted that Mark West Creek is one of the only major streams east of the mainstem Russian River to have provided high quality habitat to both Coho and Steelhead. Preserving genetic and habitat diversity in the Russian River Coho and Steelhead populations require that restoration of the Mark West Creek fish populations receive a high priority similar to streams west of the mainstem Russian River.

This growing interest in conserving MWC is not only due to its contribution of drinking water to the Russian River watershed, but also because of the historical presence of Coho Salmon in this creek. Stream surveys conducted by the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) indicate that Coho Salmon are present in Upper Mark West Creek, and steelhead are present in Upper Mark West Creek and its tributaries. A 1969 DFG Stream Survey noted steelhead ranging from 1 to 8 inches in length in numbers approximately 60 per 100' of stream in pools averaging 3' deep, 15' wide and 30' long. A report in 2008 by Mr. Stacy K. Li, a salmon and steelhead ecologist recently retired from the National Marine Fisheries Service,

notes that large pools in the MWC were filled with sediment and some pool depths were reduced from over 8 ' to less than 2 '. "Streamflow in the MWC in late October 2008 was very low, on the order of 0.01 cubic feet per second. This is about the same volume as the full flow of a garden hose. Water diversions under these very low flow conditions could easily drain the stream. Based on my observations of the condition of the Mark West Creek in this reach....the cumulative adverse habitat conditions on steelhead could easily reduce steelhead production in the Mark West Creek by at least an order of magnitude." (Stacy K. Li, 2008).

Fyke net studies conducted in Mark West Creek in 1991-1995 in part to evaluate of the juvenile steelhead populations in the nursery areas in the upstream reach of Mark West Creek, indicated that conditions in the upstream habitat had a profound effect on juvenile population size and the number of smolts making their way to sea (Merritt-Smith Consulting, 2003). The study also addressed stream flow as it relates to fish habitat, "The stream in this reach is greatly influenced by agricultural water diversions further upstream." In fact, residents living along the Mark West Creek have reported this past spring that there are few returning spawning fish and any fry that result are being killed by high temperatures and predation due to low water levels.

For these reasons, RRK strongly urges the Regional Board to pursue a more aggressive TMDL schedule to remediate and restore water quality on this critical tributary to the Russian River. To avoid the Mark West Creek steelhead population from going extinct we urge the Board to consider completing and implementing the Temperature and Sediment TMDL's in the next five years or less.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the proposed 2008 303(d) list for California's North Coast region. Riverkeeper appreciates your consideration of these comments in your process of drafting California's 2008 303(d) list water quality limited segments.

If you have any questions or would like discuss any of the above recommendations further, do not hesitate to contact RRK using information below.

Sincerely,

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See Attachments:
-1969 DFG Stream Survey
-MWC Priority Conservation Area
-Letter from Stacy K. Li