



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## SONOMA COURT ISSUES LANDMARK RULING TO PROTECT THE RUSSIAN RIVER FROM EXCESSIVE GROUNDWATER PUMPING

**August 23, 2024 (Healdsburg, CA)** – This week the Sonoma Superior Court held that the County of Sonoma failed to meet its obligations under the Public Trust Doctrine and violated the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) when it adopted a Well Ordinance that was not protective of Sonoma County creeks and rivers. The Court ordered the County to fulfill its obligations under the Public Trust Doctrine and CEQA to ensure that groundwater extraction does not harm salmon, steelhead, and other public trust resources of the County’s waterways. The County must now conduct the analysis it has failed to do to date before issuing additional groundwater pumping permits.

In April 2023, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors approved a Well Ordinance in response to a 2021 lawsuit filed by California Coastkeeper Alliance to compel the County to fulfill its public trust responsibilities. Far from solving the problem, the County’s ordinance authorized continuation of new and existing pumping to largely persist under the status quo, even in the County’s most ecologically sensitive areas without any knowledge that measures would protect our public trust resources. Given the hollow requirements of the Well Ordinance, in May 2023, Russian Riverkeeper and California Coastkeeper Alliance filed this current lawsuit to prevent Sonoma County from issuing new well permits until the County complies with CEQA and amends its Ordinance to protect public trust resources and prevent over pumping of Sonoma County creeks and rivers.

“We have long known that excessive well pumping can harm our public trust resources, such as salmon and steelhead, so we are pleased with the ruling,” says **Don McEnhill, Executive Director of Russian Riverkeeper**. “While we believe the County took an important first step by initiating the well amendment process, it was extremely important that the amendment be based in factual analysis that demonstrates how our public trust resources will be protected. As we continue to learn how to live and adapt to a changing climate, we must be able to ensure that our limited resources are protected.”

Under the Public Trust Doctrine, the County is required to consider the impacts of groundwater extraction on public trust resources and mitigate those impacts to the extent feasible. The County will now need to analyze 1) the cumulative impacts of adding groundwater wells in Sonoma County—where groundwater pumping is already unsustainable; 2) evaluate and adopt measures, including conservation and reuse measures, to offset the impacts of any new wells; and 3) mitigate the acknowledged, significant impacts to the Russian River from groundwater pumping. Importantly, the County’s analysis must be based on evidence, facts, and analysis—not assumption and wishful thinking. Further, since the Court has deemed the Well Ordinance not to be exempt from CEQA, the County must disclose, analyze, and mitigate the Ordinance’s potential environmental impacts in an environmental document.

“The court’s landmark decision is a wake-up-call for the County and all other Counties statewide that currently are not protecting rivers and streams from unabated groundwater pumping,” says **Sean Bothwell, Executive Director of California Coastkeeper Alliance**. “We hope Counties will heed this decision, and proactively do the right – and legally required – step of evaluating groundwater pumping to

ensure pumpers are not taking excessive water to the detriment of our rivers and the aquatic life that relies upon healthy flows for their survival.”

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**ABOUT CALIFORNIA COASTKEEPER ALLIANCE** - California Coastkeeper Alliance represents Waterkeepers programs statewide as they fight for drinkable, swimmable, fishable waters for all Californians. CCKA defends and expands California’s protective legislation and strengthens the function of our State Water Board. For more information, visit [www.cacoastkeeper.org](http://www.cacoastkeeper.org) or @CA\_Waterkeepers on social media.

**ABOUT RUSSIAN RIVERKEEPER** – Russian Riverkeeper’s mission is to ensure now, and in the future, that the Russian River’s mainstem and its tributaries are drinkable, swimmable, fishable, and equitably shared. Russian Riverkeeper actively pursues the protection and restoration of the Russian River’s mainstem, tributaries, and interconnected groundwaters through focused, scientifically based advocacy, public outreach, and direct engagement with the Russian River community.