

The Scott River Water Trust & Drying Pools August 2011

The Scott River Water Trust was surprised by a recent press release by Klamath Riverkeeper that fish were dying in Patterson Creek supposedly as a result of water diversions. As of July 7th, all of the water diversions on Patterson Creek above Highway 3 were leased to stay instream for the benefit of rearing habitat for young coho salmon and steelhead. Good habitat exists about ¼ mile above the bridge for several miles upstream. Of the 927 adult coho that returned to the Scott River last winter, a significant number were seen spawning in Patterson Creek, as the species also did in 2007.

For some reason, Klamath Riverkeeper seems to believe that all drying streambeds and stranded pools with fish in Scott Valley are caused by stream diversions. Without such human water use, they claim, the creeks would never be “dewatered”.

No one likes to see dying fish in stranded pools but one can't fight natural conditions either. No one should be surprised that some sections of streams dry up every year in Scott Valley. While water diversions can contribute to this situation, this behavior in these stream reaches mentioned by Klamath Riverkeeper's press release is fundamentally a natural condition and documented historically.

In 1851, journal entries by George Gibbs observed that the river in Scott Valley has only “two or three small branches which continue to flow during the dry season.” He also noted the western side of the valley next to the mountains as being very gravelly and “cut up with arroyas from the mountains”. Around 1854, the pioneer that Kidder Creek is named after found, to his dismay, that the creek's flow began falling in July every year and did not begin flowing again until the rains began.

An “arroyo” is a Spanish term for an intermittently dry creek. That is what we have in the lower reaches of most of the tributaries to the Scott River, especially when steep mountain streams enter the flatter alluvium of Scott Valley. Blame the geology and the climate. These “alluvial fans” can be readily seen where State Highway 3 bridges Kidder Creek, Patterson Creek, and Etna Creek. There is not enough stream energy to continue carrying the larger rocks. The full natural flow would not be sufficient to sustain surface flows, as shown by historic evidence.

The Water Trust seeks water leases from active diverters in priority coho streams where additional flows can benefit summer rearing habitat. French Creek and Shackleford Creek have sufficient flow during this wet year so the Water Trust is not seeking water leases there, as it has during past drought years. The main stem Scott River is currently at 200 cubic feet per second (cfs) flow. With the lowest flow always around September 1st, there is no danger of the river drying up in the next 3 weeks.

The Water Trust was glad to see that this year's stronger coho brood year had a run of 927 adults, which is in the ballpark of the 800 to 2,000 coho that the California Dept. of Fish and Game (CDFG) estimated the Scott River's population to be in the early 1960s.