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CONTACTS:

Shannon Riley, Deputy City Manager, City of Ukiah
Phone: (707) 467-5793 | Email: sriley@cityofukiah.com

Elizabeth Salomone, General Manager, Russian River Flood Control & Water Conservation Improvement District
Phone: (707)462-5278 | Email: districtmanager@rrfc.net

“MENDOCINO COUNTY WATER RESILIENCY TASK FORCE” WORKING WITH STATE OFFICIALS TO PROTECT UKIAH VALLEY WATER USERS IN LOW-SUPPLY CONDITIONS

Ukiah, CA. December 16, 2020. – Several local agencies and water policy experts have joined together to form the Mendocino County Water Resiliency Task Force. The purpose of the Task Force is to strengthen regional water resources through discussion, coordination, and shared information. Currently, the Task Force is working to advocate for fair and accurate water resource planning as state officials prepare a response to drought conditions in the Upper Russian River.

Task Force members, including the City of Ukiah, the Russian River Flood Control & Water Conservation Improvement District, and the Mendocino County Farm Bureau are working together to provide information to the State Water Resources Control Board (“State Water Board”). The State Water Board began a process in June to look at water supply and demand levels in the Upper Russian River Watershed. Getting this analysis right is important as it will influence any actions taken by the State Water Board in 2021 to curtail water use in the region.

“The Task Force can bring many voices together as one, to represent our unique water supply system in cooperative actions with the rest of the County, our downstream neighbors, and State Water Board staff,” said Elizabeth Salomone, General Manager for the Russian River Flood Control & Water Improvement District, and lead for the Task Force.

In particular, the Task Force is advocating for the State Water Board to use a water model based on the realistic, rather than “unimpaired”, flows in the area. Employing a realistic model would account for real-world system components such as the Coyote Valley Dam and the reservoir it creates in Lake Mendocino, inflows from the Potter Valley Project, in-stream uses, and various diversion points along the Russian River that are accessed by different water users.

As part of its engagement with the State Water Board, the Task Force sent a letter on December 8, 2020. Advocating for the interests of the entire region, the Task Force noted: “The use of an unimpaired flow model appears to contradict the water rights regime by and through which all water users on the Upper Russian River exercise their various rights to divert and put Russian River water to beneficial use.” The Task Force is holding regular meetings with the State Water Board to discuss these concerns, among others. These discussions have been helpful and constructive, and the Task Force looks forward to continued dialogue.

“Accurate water resource planning is essential for the farming and ranching businesses that help keep Mendocino County strong,” said Devon Jones, Executive Director of the Mendocino County Farm Bureau. “There needs to be an improved understanding of both water inputs and outputs if we are looking to refine water use in the future.”

“In the short term, the Task Force can explore methods to enhance conservation in the Russian River watershed. Longer term, it could develop a locally designed plan for resiliency in the event of extended drought,” said Salomone. “The hope is to show the State Water Board a unified position and a representative voice for the Mendocino County portion of the watershed.”

California’s 2019–2020 water year was the third driest in the Upper Russian River watershed in recorded history. Without a significant and immediate increase in rainfall, it is likely that the State Water Board will take action in 2021, which may include curtailments of water diversions. With possible restrictions on the horizon, the Task Force is working together now to ensure the broadest and most reasonable protection of water resources for the Upper Russian River, including the Ukiah Valley.

“The City of Ukiah plays a critical role in water resource planning at the regional level,” said Sean White, Director of Sewer and Water for the City of Ukiah. “We are working with the Task Force to protect the interests of the entire Ukiah Valley – looking not only at strategies for 2021, but also at longer term solutions that will secure our water supply reliability and ensure ongoing affordable service.”

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