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# EEL RIVER

**THREAT:** Dams

**STATE:** California

**AT RISK:** Fish and wildlife; tribal culture and sustenance

## SUMMARY

The Eel River once teemed with abundant native fish and other wildlife, supporting the Wiyot, Sinkyone, Lassik, Nongatl, Yuki and Wailaki peoples who have lived along the river since time immemorial. Today the river's Chinook salmon, steelhead, and Pacific lamprey are all headed toward extinction in large part because of two obsolete dams that make up Pacific Gas & Electric's (PG&E's) Potter Valley Hydroelectric Project. Together the dams completely block salmon migration and harm river habitat. The license for the dams recently expired and PG&E no longer wants to operate the facilities. Moreover, in a March 16, 2023 press release, PG&E indicated that Scott Dam's seismic risks would result in a 20,000 acre foot reduction in the project's reservoir capacity. It's up to federal regulators to require PG&E to remove the dams as part of the decommissioning plan, expected during the Fall of 2023.

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## THE RIVER

The Eel River is the ancestral home of tribal groups including the Wiyot, Sinkyone, Lassik, Nongatl, Yuki and Wailaki peoples, and also now the home of other Tribes that were forcibly moved to the area in the early 20th Century. Many of these people continue to live along and care for the river today.

The river is the third largest in California, with an area of 3,684 square miles. The mainstem Eel River's headwaters are located in the Snow Mountain Wilderness in Mendocino National Forest, where cold waters provide an ideal refuge for native fish as the climate warms.

The Eel River was historically one of the most productive fisheries in the state, supporting a diverse array of native species, including four anadromous salmonid species (Chinook and coho salmon, steelhead-rainbow trout, and coastal cutthroat trout), two sturgeon species, and three lamprey species. The construction of Cape Horn Dam in 1908 and Scott Dam in 1922 have severely impacted fisheries in the river.

## THE THREAT

Two obsolete and unsafe dams on the Eel River, Scott and Cape Horn (part of the Potter Valley Hydroelectric Project), are preventing recovery of critically endangered salmonids, including federally protected Chinook salmon and steelhead trout. The dams completely block access to high-quality habitat in the upper watershed for these fish and also prevent sediment from moving through the system, leading to habitat loss in the Eel River watershed. Once-prolific fish populations are no longer able to access 89 miles of Chinook salmon spawning habitat and 288 miles of steelhead habitat.



# EEL RIVER

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## TAKE ACTION:

[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/  
EELRIVER2023](https://AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/EELRIVER2023)



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The high elevation and cool headwaters above the dams are critical to the recovery of these native fish in an era of climate change and are especially important to rare summer steelhead, which are listed as endangered under California's Endangered Species Act. Studies have shown that resident trout living above the dams still carry the genes for ocean migration, suggesting that once the dams are removed those fish may once again return to their ancestral spawning grounds. Scott and Cape Horn Dams have caused immense harm to the Eel River ecosystem and the communities that depend on a healthy Eel River watershed. The dams adversely

impact Tribal Nations and Indigenous people for whom the Eel River holds cultural significance and who rely on it for sustenance. Loss of culturally and economically important fish runs, habitat loss and deterioration, and reductions in water quantity and quality are some of the negative impacts caused by the dams. Additionally, the way the dams are managed causes fish to struggle at key moments in their life cycle due to low water flows associated with out of basin diversions, inhospitable water temperatures caused by the reservoirs, water quality degradation including toxic algae outbreaks, excessive predation at a poorly designed fishway, and the proliferation of invasive species. In addition, PG&E recently admitted that Scott Dam, which impounds the Lake Pillsbury reservoir, presents unacceptable seismic risk when the reservoir is at full capacity.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

PG&E's decision to surrender their license to operate the dams and decommission the project is an enormous opportunity to remove obsolete unsafe dams that endanger downstream communities, facilitate salmon recovery, restore cultural connections, revitalize an important commercial and recreational fishery, and reconnect what would be California's longest free flowing river.

PG&E must expedite the next step towards restoring this river and its communities by removing both dams, repairing the damage they have caused, and ensuring the safety of downstream communities. They must also take immediate steps to reduce the impacts to already struggling fish populations caused by the current operation of the dams. If PG&E isn't willing to do this on their own, the federal agency that oversees hydropower dams, the Federal Energy & Regulatory Commission (FERC), should hold PG&E to account and require the full removal of Scott and Cape Horn dams as a component of decommissioning. PG&E cannot be allowed to walk away from these obsolete dams leaving a liability in place for current and future generations to contend with.