



North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board

Regional Water Quality Control Board North Coast Region Staff Summary Report October 1, 2026

ITEM: 3

SUBJECT: Update on Outstanding National Resource Waters Project (*Matt St John*)

BOARD ACTION: This is an informational item; no action will be taken by the Board.

BACKGROUND: The purpose of this informational item is to update board members and interested parties on the status and anticipated scope of the North Coast Water Board's Outstanding National Resource Waters Project (Project). This Project was one of eleven projects included in the FY 2024-2027 Planning Program Workplan developed based on the 2023 Triennial Review and approved by the North Coast Water Board in June 2024 (Resolution No. R1-2024-0027). During the 2023 Triennial Review, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) requested that reaches of Cedar Creek and Elder Creek, and their named and unnamed tributaries, both tributaries to the South Fork of the Eel River, be designated as Outstanding National Resource Waters (ONRWs). The NGOs offered to provide support on the Project, and in November 2025, the Executive Officer of the North Coast Water Board signed a nonbinding Memorandum of Understanding with CalTrout, CalWild, and Trout Unlimited, in which these NGOs agreed to conduct technical and policy research and provide recommendations in a technical report to support the North Coast Water Board's staff report for the Project. Coordination with these NGOs and the Pew Trust is ongoing. This information item outlines the current status and scope of the Project, summarized here.

DISCUSSION: The authority for a Water Board to designate a waterbody as an ONRW comes from the Federal and State Antidegradation Policies. California's Antidegradation Policy, the *Statement of Policy with Respect to Maintaining High Quality of Waters in California* (Resolution 68-16) protects beneficial uses by preventing degradation of surface water and groundwater. Known as "Tier 3" waters under the Federal Antidegradation Policy, ONRWs are high quality waters recognized for their exceptional recreational or ecological significance. Waterbodies designated ONRW are afforded the highest level of protection; no permanent water quality degradation is allowed. The State Antidegradation Policy incorporates the federal Antidegradation Policy where the federal policy applies.

This Project emerged as a priority during the 2023 Triennial Review based on the importance of safeguarding high quality waters across the North Coast, particularly those that support rare or sensitive species, provide cold-water refugia, or serve as climate-resilient strongholds. Building on that direction, the North Coast Water Board has initiated a structured planning effort to evaluate potential ONRW designations, establish clear criteria and processes, and ensure transparent public engagement.

There are only two waterbodies designated as ONRWs in California - Lake Tahoe and Mono Lake, both within the Lahontan Region. Given the limited number of ONRW designations in California, the North Coast Water Board is in new regulatory territory in considering ONRW designations in the North Coast. Therefore, the Project is in the preliminary scoping phase, informed to date by meaningful coordination between North Coast Water Board staff and the NGOs. Beginning in late 2026, staff plan to initiate consultation with Tribes and conduct public scoping for the Project pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act.

To date, Staff have evaluated a range of options and currently envisions that the Project would result in amendments to the Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coast Region (Basin Plan), including the following components:

- 1) Nonsubstantive clarifications to the existing summaries of the Federal and State Antidegradation Policies provided in the Water Quality Objectives Chapter 3;
- 2) Establish a new section in the Regionwide Implementation, Prohibitions, Plans, and Policies Chapter 5 to incorporate a program of implementation for any waterbody designated ONRW in the North Coast; and
- 3) Designate Cedar and Elder Creeks and their named and unnamed tributaries as ONRWs.

In addition, the Project is scoped to include the development of guidance for the process for nomination and designation of future ONRWs in the North Coast.

Though preliminary in concept, each of these components of the Project will be outlined in the staff presentation. In addition, NGO representatives will outline ONRW designations in other states and provide an overview of the water quality and habitat values of Cedar and Elder Creeks, and their tributaries, that make them worthwhile candidates for ONRW designation.

RECOMMENDATION: N/A

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

- [R1-2024-0027, Final Staff Report 2023 Triennial Review](https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/board_info/board_meetings/06_2024/pdf/7/triennial-finalstaffrpt.pdf)
(https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/board_info/board_meetings/06_2024/pdf/7/triennial-finalstaffrpt.pdf)
- [North Coast Water Board ONRW Project webpage](https://waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/water_issues/programs/basin_plan/Outstanding_National_Resource_Waters/index.html)
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