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Can vineyard owners and Russian River salmon live in harmony?

Conflict heading toward a January showdown

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A showdown is looming between grape growers and the agency tasked with protecting the fish in the Russian River.

Russian River grape growers are collecting data to counter a nearing state decision on how to protect endangered fish from the impacts of water pumping for frost protection.

The state Water Resources Control Board is contemplating new regulations along the river after federal fish managers declared that water diversions for frost protection have harmed salmon and steelhead.

Three environmental groups are pressuring the state to adopt strict rules. Last month the groups formally notified the water board of their intent to sue the state under the federal Endangered Species Act.

A spokesman for one of the three environmental groups said the fish will remain at risk of extinction unless the state takes decisive action and rejects the idea of self-regulation by growers.

"We don't really have time to sit around and spend 10 years discussing half measures that may or may not work," said Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity.

The other two environmental groups are Northern California River Watch and Coast Action Group.

Farm leaders in Sonoma and Mendocino counties counter that since the federal regulators brought the issue to the forefront in 2008, the grape growers have made great strides to reduce impacts on salmon and steelhead. That includes the construction



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Coho salmon, such as these fingerlings released into the Russian River, are front and center in the debate to limit water diversion from the river to grape growers who use river water for frost protection.

of new reservoirs near Hopland, the site of fish strandings in 2008.

"We're here to protect fish as well, but it can't be done by eliminating the viticulture industry in Mendocino and Sonoma County," said Devon Jones, executive director of the Mendocino County Farm Bureau.

On freezing nights in spring, many growers spray water over their vineyards to protect the vines from damage. The irrigation water freezes and encapsulates the green buds in ice, keeping the plant tissue safe at a constant 32-degree temperature.

But the National Marine Fisheries Service has called for limits on the diversion of stream water after frost protection stranded and killed fish in 2008. The strandings affected endangered coho salmon and threatened steelhead, and occurred again last spring.

"Based on the information that we have, it appears that frost protection has a significant impact on ESA-listed species, and those impact association with frost protection are widespread," said Steve Edmondson, the service's Northern California habitat manager based in Santa Rosa.

Five grower meetings will occur from Jan. 6 to 14 in the river basin in Sonoma County.

"It is really critical that all growers get involved with this," said Nick Frey, president of the 1,800-member Sonoma County Wine Grape Commission.

This spring "there's a risk of not everyone having water for frost protection," Frey said.

The water board could take action as early as Jan. 5, although an agenda for that meeting has yet to be released. Several observers said the board appears ready to put new rules in place before frost protection begins in March.

Before the water board's January meeting, farm leaders are scrambling to collect data on surface water use along three tributaries of special concern: Mark West, Maacama and Green Valley creeks. As well, they hope to inform farmers of recent developments and to urge those on the river's tributaries to adopt more fish-friendly practices.

"Let's get the diversions out of the creeks and let's get the water stored in ponds," said Pete Opatz, a viticulturist overseeing vineyards in Napa and Sonoma counties for Silverado Premium Properties.

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