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Friends of Butte Creek, Allen Harthorn, Executive Director

Can Spring Run Salmon Rebound on Butte Creek?

On the heels of the worst run of Spring Run Chinook in over twenty years, the current state of the DeSabra-Centerville Hydroelectric project sale/transfer/decommissioning is not looking good for the salmon on Butte Creek. Pacific Gas and Electric, it would seem, would prefer to shut it all down, decommission all the project parts and walk away. This was made clear last year when PG&E first announced their intentions to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to surrender the license. Almost everything included in the project is more than 100 years old with decades of deferred maintenance, including several components that have failed and are far too costly to repair, refurbish or rebuild. The price they receive for the small amount of power it produces is steadily going down due to other renewable energy sources. The costs of maintaining the far reaching tentacles of the project are high. It is not the most attractive of businesses to consider purchasing.

In their response to FERC's requirement to try and sell or transfer the license to other entities, PG&E committed to working with stakeholders to ensure the environmental, economic and recreational values of the project would continue. However in the current discussions they have not demonstrated that they would be flexible in addressing the many complicated assets and options associated with this project. Most recently they have decided that they no longer need to monitor the condition of the endangered salmon through the summer. This despite their inaction on correcting serious water temperature heating problems with the way the project is operated.

The Centerville Schoolhouse Working Group was formed in June of last year to address possible changes to project operations. The group of State and Federal agencies and their biologists, local and regional environmental groups, downstream water interests, the Butte Creek Improvement Company, Inc., a local entity run by two Butte Creek residents who developed the Forks of the Butte hydro project in the 1980's, and the Centerville Recreation and Historical Association met three times last year and are continuing their efforts in February 2018. The goal is to work with entities interested in taking over the project and to try to convince PG&E and FERC that there are viable options that will keep the water flowing from the West Branch Feather River over to Butte Creek. This flow augments the natural conditions for salmon and steelhead in Butte Creek. With rising air and water temperatures, the limited habitat left for Spring Run Chinook Salmon in California is desperately critical for their survival. Maintaining and /or increasing the quantity of cool water and increasing available habitat will help sustain the populations in an uncertain future.

Detailed analysis of the project by the Friends of Butte Creek and the Butte Creek Improvement Company show many inefficient components that were developed during the Gold Rush and have had little upgrading since then. Two dams on Butte Creek were built long before there was any awareness of the extraordinary value of the fisheries of Butte Creek, and as such they have no fish ladders and nothing to screen the fish out of the canals. Centerville Head Dam is considered the upper limit for salmon as its twenty foot concrete structure sits atop bedrock scoured by the overflow, presenting an impassible barrier for salmon. It has not been used to divert water since before the drought and the entire Centerville part of the project has been out of commission since 2011. Butte Head Dam, deep in upper Butte Creek Canyon is old, completely filled with sediment and suffering from age and natural



deterioration. The canals fed off these dams are among the most expensive and environmentally damaging parts of the project as failures are common and those failures inevitably lead to sediment pollution in Butte Creek.

The ideas being put forth from the working group and Butte Creek Improvement Company, could greatly increase the efficiency of the water transfer to Butte Creek, eliminate canal losses, and virtually eliminate any additional warming of the water. These improvements would be a significant improvement for the fishery habitat and the production of hydroelectricity. This translates to great benefits to the downstream water users as the water supply would be increased and the water would be more available to Butte Creek during the critical up migration period from May to July.

The Friends of Butte Creek believe it is high time to begin the process! Centerville Powerhouse is dead and PG&E needs to lay out their plan to clean it up, put it to bed and remove the dam. Butte Creek Improvement Company has worked with the Centerville Recreation and Historical Association to take over the historical Centerville Powerhouse and the Boys and Girls Club to take over the PG&E cabins and campground. Trail groups are looking at ways to maintain the flume trails in a way that respects individual private property, improves safety, and eliminates the unstable and environmentally significant failure potential for much of the flume. PG&E needs to step up and get moving with decommissioning the useless components of the system and the transfer of the assets of value. The salmon cannot wait!