

Chapter 1. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1 Introduction

The Cochiti Reach of the Middle Rio Grande has undergone drastic landscape alterations. The installation of the Galisteo and Cochiti dams have altered the riparian ecosystem with reduced pulse flows and accelerated riverbed incision. The regulated hydrograph in the Rio Grande has swift currents, incised river banks, abandoned side channels, isolated backwaters, and thick stands of exotic vegetation.

The Santo Domingo Tribe-Natural Resources Branch (NRB) proposes to work at three sites along the Rio Grande and to place Large Woody Debris (LWD) in the Rio Grande from the Rio Galisteo confluence to the Santo Domingo southern grant boundary. The NRB will be practicing multiple habitat restoration techniques outlined in the "Habitat Restoration Plan for the Middle Rio Grande," (Tetra Tech 2004). All of the proposed restoration projects are aimed at enhancing riverine features to accommodate the needs of the Rio Grande silvery minnow (silvery minnow). One project will be the second phase of an earlier awarded project, which involves the restoration of an oxbow, while the remaining two projects will incorporate low-flow side channels and backwater habitats. Each project will incorporate embayments or scallops and other habitat features associated with desirable silvery minnow nursery habitat. The LWD project is intended to encourage sediment deposition and water velocity reduction, resulting in suitable fisheries habitat for the silvery minnow.

The Project is funded by the Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Collaborative Program (Collaborative Program) through the Bureau of Reclamation. This Environmental Assessment (EA) has been conducted to evaluate the impacts of the construction on environmental resources and their relationship to other projects while complying with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (42 U.S.C. 4331-4335).

1.2 Proposed Action

The proposed federal action is the funding of various habitat restoration projects by the Collaborative Program through Reclamation. These projects involve removal of non-native phreatophytes and habitat construction that are anticipated to contribute to the enhancement and recovery of silvery minnow in the Middle Rio Grande (MRG). The proposed projects are located on Santo Domingo Tribal Land. Three projects are located on the east side of the Rio Grande and one project extends from the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Rio Galisteo to the southern tribal grant boundary.

The proposed Rio Grande projects include diversifying habitat for silvery minnow by removing sediment from abandoned oxbows to create embayments, backwaters and side channels. This project will complement other restoration efforts taking place on Santo Domingo Tribal Land such as phreatophyte removal projects in the Rio Galisteo which



will allow additional sediment transport to the Rio Grande, enhancing silvery minnow habitat.

1.3 Purpose and Need

The purpose of the project, funded by Reclamation, is to implement habitat restoration projects to benefit the silvery minnow and the flycatcher, which is an important component of the Collaborative Program. The implementation of the Proposed Action would also benefit the silvery minnow habitat on Santo Domingo Pueblo.

The need for the Proposed Action is to satisfy federal requirements under the Biological Opinion (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2003) for Reclamation's Water and River Maintenance Operations, the USACE's Flood Control Operations, and Related Non-Federal Actions on the Middle Rio Grande, New Mexico, 2003 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2003). The Biological Opinion requires the funding and collaborative execution of habitat restoration projects on the Middle Rio Grande that will improve survival of all life stages of the endangered silvery minnow, as specified in RPA element S:

In consultation with the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife] Service and appropriate Pueblos and in coordination with parties to the consultation, action agencies shall conduct habitat/ecosystem restoration projects in the Middle Rio Grande to increase backwaters and oxbows, widen the river channel, and/or lower river banks to produce shallow water habitats, overbank flooding, and regeneration stands of willows and cottonwood to benefit the silvery minnow, the flycatcher, or their habitats. Projects should be examined for depletions. It is the Service's understanding that the objective of the action agencies and parties to the consultation is to develop projects that are depletion neutral. By 2013, additional restoration totaling 1,600 acres (648 hectares) will be completed in the action area. In the short term (5 years or less), the emphasis for silvery minnow habitat restoration projects shall be placed on river reaches north of the San Acacia Diversion Dam. Projects should result in the restoration/creation of blocks of habitat 24 hectares (60 acres) or larger [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2003:95-96].

1.4 Relevant Statutes, Regulations, and other Plans

Compliance is required under the provisions of Section 7 of the ESA as administered by the USFWS, and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (16 U.S.C. 470) as administered by the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). A site visit and review of the project was performed by the USACE. It was determined that under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) that a permit was not required to conduct these restoration activities.

