

Final Meeting Minutes

Technical Committee Meeting Gila River Basin Native Fishes Conservation Program USFS Hunter Building, Springerville, AZ January 21, 2014

Participants:

- Rob Clarkson (Reclamation)
- Doug Duncan (USFWS)
- Yvette Paroz (USFS)
- Tim Frey and Heidi Blasius (BLM)
- Andrew Monie and Kirk Patten (NMDGF)
- Tony Robinson and Jeff Sorensen (AZGFD)

I. Issues that will require FWS reconsultation of the 2008 biological opinion

A. Potential changes in who will implement contracting administration of the fund transfer program

- USFWS, Rob and other Reclamation employees had discussed the possibility of having AZGFD administer the projects. The final decision was tentatively no--that would not work for various Federal requirements, additional agreements needed, and potential conflict of interest (with AZGFD administering program funds and receiving significant amounts of the same funds as a recipient). However, Reclamation (Boulder City Office) can administer the projects, and we believe with less delay in getting funding to the partners than we had with the previous setup. Reclamation and USFWS will begin working out the details and then initiate transition from USFWS to Reclamation administration of projects, with the goal of having the transition completed by the end of September 2014. For now, still go through Doug (USFWS-AESO) to process current agreements and reports.

B. New species listings

- Doug clarified: for Reclamation to consult (Section 7) on the species, they have to be listed, but to conference on the species, they must be proposed.
 1. Gartersnakes -
 - If northern Mexican and narrow-headed gartersnakes get listed, USFWS and Reclamation would likely re-consult and add both gartersnakes to the list of species affected by CAP because nonnative (spiny-rayed) fish are a primary threat to both species. Critical habitat for both gartersnakes is still proposed.
 2. Chubs –
 - If roundtail chub and headwater chub are listed, USFWS and Reclamation would likely re-consult and add both chubs to the list of species affected by CAP because nonnative fish are a primary threat to both species.
 3. Other? -
 - If New Mexican jumping mouse gets listed, it is not likely that this species would be added to the list because they are not impacted by nonnative fish.

For fish barrier construction, Reclamation could consult on just that barrier project in jumping mice habitat (e.g., West Fork Black River).

C. New proposed fish barriers and construction schedules

- Progress is slow in getting CAP fish barriers built for numerous reasons—after 18 years, only six barriers complete. Reclamation is still obligated under the BO for six more fish barriers in Gila River Basin. Five fish barriers are in the planning stages:
 - a) Spring Creek in Oak Creek drainage: if NEPA proceeds well, it could be constructed in 2015;
 - b) West Fork Black River: joint project with AZGFD CAMP; likely construction estimate for 2015;
 - c) Eagle Creek: joint project with Freeport McMoRan; construction likely in 2016;
 - d) O'Donnell Creek: issues with Audubon Research Ranch manager's objections; now back to the original plan to improve the existing barrier on BLM lands to reduce the threat of headcutting around that barrier. May be able to start work in 2015;
 - e) Redfield Canyon: Reclamation is still pursuing a condemnation of Arizona State Land to acquire the land rights for the barrier, but it has turned into a lengthy and complex process. The Department of Justice will need to get involved. It is unclear when this issue will be resolved, but Reclamation is hopeful that construction could occur 2015.

It is unlikely that any CAP fish barriers will be built in 2014.

D. Documentation of fish monitoring changes

- The change in focus from monitoring nonnative fish presence in the canals and water diversions to monitoring native fish populations in the basin's headwaters needs to be documented in the revised BO. The stream monitoring contract is currently being led by AZGFD's Ross Timmons, and just completed its second year of the three-year contract.

E. Possible changes to the CAP (project description)

F. Other?

II. Identification of FY2015 fund transfer projects

Preliminary list:

1. Topminnow stock maintenance (yr 5 of 5)
 - Costs were reduced by half for this last year. ASU's Animal Care Facility is maintaining several lineages of Gila topminnow as refuge populations; some of which have redundant populations in the wild and in other captive sites.
2. NMDGF recovery actions (yr 8 of n)
 - a. West Fork Gila River mechanical removal (yr 3 of 5)
 - Still going forward with mechanical removal efforts; not likely to do more than one trip per year.
 - b. Little Creek mechanical removal (yr 3 of 5)

- Unlikely to be able to completely remove brown trout. Brown trout occur high in the drainage, above loach minnow habitat. Recommend stocking loach minnow (Forks lineage) if Bubbling Ponds stock is abundant. Propose dropping the mechanical removals at this site, since it has some deep slots and lots of boulders and hiding spaces; it also has lots of suckers that incidentally would be affected by the removal efforts.
- c. Spikedace repatriations to San Francisco River (yr 3 of 5)
- Post-fire, there is not much left in the river; spikedace had been stocked (last time in 2010; this and the previous stocking only with a few numbers of fish) downstream of the area impacted by the fire and are not likely to still be there. NMDGF would like to get in there to survey this year to assess. We are not assuming that the habitat is gone. Recommend stocking Gila River lineage spikedace again, after the assessment survey. Loach minnow occurs above this area.
- d. Turkey Creek tributary surveys/mechanical removal (yr 2 of 4)
- Did not implement removal efforts in 2013, but plan to restart efforts again this year. This is a chub system with one species (tentatively Gila chub) above a natural quasi-barrier and another species (roundtail chub?) below that barrier. NMDGF is removing a few sunfish and occasionally catfish and bass in the lower reaches; there are some trout in the upper reaches. Note to AZGFD—the stream monitoring contract does not need to monitor this stream since NMDGF is already doing that.
- e. T&E fish repatriations and monitoring (yr 2 of 5)
- Saliz Creek – stock San Francisco lineage loach minnow from Bubbling Ponds or transfer wild fish directly from the river if wild population numbers are up.
 - Mule Creek – second stocking of Harden Cienega lineage Gila chub occurred in 2013. Collected six chub from the prior year’s stocking—they looked healthy. The stocking was difficult since the fish were carried in via game trail by bucket. A helicopter sling load of fish would be better. Original access via the river trail was impacted by the fire and flooding so it is non-existent now. NMDGF wants to do five years of stocking, then assess. Per Tony—plan to get more chub from Harden Cienega.
 - Little Creek – plan to stock loach minnow this year with Bubbling Ponds (West Fork Gila River) stock (preferred). Per Rob—move funds from Little Creek mechanical removal to T&E fish repatriations for this work.
 - Start planning for inventory of Gila River Forks and tributaries—NMDGF is pushing to maintain a native fish community in the Middle Fork Gila River. The upper reaches of the Middle Fork are believed to be free of nonnative fish after the Gila Whitewater-Baldy Fire. Per Yvette—some off-channel sites have green sunfish that need to be taken out (i.e. Snow Lake is 10-20 miles upstream of potential barrier

site on the Middle Fork). A potential barrier site is now owned by NMDGF, a ¼ mile from the visitor center and can be driven to. NMGFD and Reclamation have already assessed that it is a good barrier site. Look into a possible piscicide treatment of the Middle Fork and Snow Lakes if necessary. Snow Lake Dam needs repairs, so they'll draw down the lake to do the repairs—ideal time for a chemical treatment. There are green sunfish just below the dam, and lots of carp in the lake. NMDGF also owns the land and dam. Snow Lake is on USFS land.

2. FWS recovery actions (yr 8 of n)
 - Per Doug—priority to get AZGFD and ASU contracts done first, since their past funding runs out at the end of the month. Next will be AZ BLM followed by NMDGF.
 - a. West Fork Gila River mechanical removal (yr 3 of 5)
 - b. Little Creek mechanical removal (yr 3 of 5) – Deleted.
 - c. Spikedace repatriations to San Francisco River (yr 3 of 5)
 - d. Turkey Creek tributary surveys/mechanical removal (yr 2 of 4)
 - e. T&E fish repatriations and monitoring (yr 2 of 5)
4. USFS recovery actions (yr 8 of n)
 - Per Yvette—NMDGF covered the updates per task; nothing new. Stephanie Coleman (USFS A-SNF) is requesting help from AZGFD on fish project planning.
 - a. West Fork Gila River mechanical removal (yr 3 of 5)
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 - e. T&E fish repatriations and monitoring (yr 2 of 5)
5. Surveys of Gila River tributaries on BLM lands (yr 2 of 2)
 - Per Tim—NM BLM needs to get the agreement paperwork done for Doug to process; includes surveys in Blue Creek, Bear Creek, and Apache Creek, NM. Need to hire a temp. AZGFD note—Bear Creek is on the list for the stream monitoring contract; Kirk recommends holding off on surveying that another year while NMDGF finishes its land acquisition along that drainage. Then Ross should contact Tim, Kirk and Andrew on a collaborative survey of the stream. Per Rob—change this agreement to a three-year term.
6. AZGFD recovery actions (yr 8 of n)
 - a. Updated list of old continuation projects
 - See Tony's handout of priority actions under the 2009 agreement.
 - The Program had extra funds last fiscal year, and AZGFD got additional funds for four tasks (1. Summer interns, 2. Fish health assessments, 3. AOO expenses, 4. Bubbling Ponds Native Fish Conservation Facility miscellaneous supplies). The funds for fish health assessments and extra AOO for AZGFD will continue in future years. The other two will not, so that money (about \$17,000) is available for other projects. The various agencies were told to submit proposals to Rob and Doug by February 11.

- b. Summer intern assistance (?)
- c. Fish health assessments (?)
- d. Operating expense increase (?)
- e. Tonto NF/AZGFD split position (?)
 - A proposed split-funded (by AZGFD and USFS) position to work on NEPA and ESA compliance for projects on Tonto National Forest. If the CAP Program contributes \$27,600, it would cover a quarter FTE for this position. All work for this position would be identified under an IGA. Rob and Doug were not supportive—Program funding would not be able to make this a multi-year commitment; and likely insufficient funds under current Program-funded commitments. Kirk and Yvette were not sure that a split-funded position would be the most effective way to accomplish CAP priorities. Yvette suggested that funding individual task orders to the Tonto may be a good way to support CAP work on the forest. We suggest that if needed, additional Program funding could be more effective going to a consultant to complete NEPA on a CAP project.
- 7. Bubbling Ponds O&M (yr 8 of n)
- 8. Other?

III. Identification of new projects to accommodate extra funds when Reclamation is unable to construct fish barriers

Per Rob--Reclamation has had a change in administration of fish barrier funds. The new policy is that if funds are not expended on a barrier project in a current year they will be lost; previously the funds would just roll over to the next year. So, the Program needs to come up with a list of projects that could conceivably be implemented on short notice if fish barrier projects get delayed. Suggestions included:

1. Land acquisition; but unclear on how long that process takes;
2. Expanding the native fish facility at Bubbling Ponds,
3. New captive rearing facility at AZ Sonoran Desert Museum, University of Arizona, or elsewhere;
4. New TNC pond at Lower San Pedro River preserve;
5. Water rights acquisition, but unclear on how long that would take;
6. Outyears for piscicide and crayfish biocide development studies?
7. Chub morphology study?
8. Hatchery genetics analyses? This should be part of a broodstock development plan.
9. Hire a consultant to do compliance work for repatriations/renovations on USFS lands?
10. Install temporary rip-rap barriers in critical locations of streams threatened by imminent invasion by nonnative fish when there isn't time to plan/fund a more permanent fish barrier? This would still require advanced compliance work, but the Fossil Creek temporary fish barrier at Sallie Mae Wash was a good example of a quick response to an upstream invasion of nonnative fish
11. Other. The team was asked to get other ideas to Rob. When funds become available, the Tech Comm will confer with emails and conference calls.

Rob will write up the project blurbs for 6 and 7. Matt O'Neill will write up the project blurbs for 2 and 8.

IV. Fish barrier update

- See fish barrier status above. Other possibilities include: Middle Fork Gila River, NM (very good option); Sycamore/Sheep Bridge, Verde River, AZ (?); above the Gila trout fish barrier in Black Canyon, a tributary to the East Fork Gila River, NM; Blue Creek, NM; and Dix Creek, AZ, lower diversion needs improvement due to flood damage.

V. Native fish conservation/renovation/repatriation/monitoring activities update

- Per Jeff and Tony—recent direction (January 17) from AZGFD leadership to evaluate upcoming and planned rotenone treatments before moving forward on any new proposed treatments, besides the ongoing planning for the Virgin River Gorge treatment and Haigler Creek treatment.
- Per Rob—we can't just wait or walk away from a proposed Blue River renovation.
- Per Yvette and Tony—suggest a face-to-face meeting among Jim deVos (AZGFD), Steve Spangle (USFWS), Alex Smith (Reclamation), Jim Zornes and Bobby Barrera (USFS) to discuss and resolve this issue.
- Per Rob—if anyone is building native fish refuge ponds, please ask Reclamation for recommendations, to improve the pond's design, maintenance, and sustainability. We've learned a lot in the past, and can help others in preventing repeat problems with cattails, pond liners, and water loss.

VI. Other discussion items?

- Jeff notified the group that the AZGFD warehouse is still holding 11 5-gallon canisters of liquid sodium permanganate leftover from the Bonita Creek renovation. Per the AFS SOP and AZGFD's piscicide planning and implementation procedures, we can only use potassium permanganate to neutralize rotenone during future treatments. This stockpile of sodium permanganate is taking up space in AZGFD's warehouse and should be given to someone that can use it...SRP? Local water treatment plants? Quagga mussel researchers? Disposing of this strong oxidizer would be expensive. None of the group had any strong opinions on what to do with this stockpile. Jeff will ask Brian Moorhead at SRP if they could use that stockpile of sodium permanganate for their quagga mussel research and control efforts.
- Jeff will set up a Doodle poll to determine availability of Policy and Tech Comm reps, and schedule the joint Policy-Tech Committee meeting in February or March.
- Jeff to also send electronic copy of the UA study on crayfish tolerance to different brands of rotenone. He handed out a few hardcopies of that report during the meeting. The short story—northern crayfish are not affected by CFT Legumine brand of rotenone, so for neighboring states that have native crayfish populations impacted by nonnative fish, CFT Legumine would be a good choice to use (and likely help reduce incidental take of native crayfish during a treatment).

- The Program's website – do we make it more public and increase our exposure? There are both pros and cons in doing so. We didn't discuss fully since it was getting late in the day.
- Per Rob—Reclamation's rules have changed, so he can no longer make Program ballcaps or other logo wear for the partners. However, that should not stop one of the partners from doing so, if their rules allow it.

Meeting notes by Jeff Sorensen and Tony Robinson, AZGFD

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- A. Outyears for piscicide and crayfish biocide development studies?
- B. Chub morphology study?
- C. Hatchery genetics analyses?
- D. New captive propagation facility?
- E. Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum or U of A refuge establishment?
- F. Land acquisitions?
- G. Others?

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