

**Gila River Basin Native Fish Conservation Program
Policy Committee Meeting
Tuesday, July 20, 2021 *1PM – 3PM (AZT)**

Meeting Objectives

- Review work completed by the Program in the last year
- Finalize recommendations for the FY22 Work Plan
- Provide relevant updates on projects, contracts and species' recoveries

Participants: Bill Stewart, Kent Mosher, Sean Heath (USBR), Julie Carter, Brian Hickerson (AGFD), Doug Duncan, Jeff Humphrey, Cat Crawford (USFWS), Heidi Blasius (BLM), Kirk Patten (NMGF), Mark Lamb, Carrie Eberly, Lisa Clark (SDR)

Next Steps:

- Send guidance document – SDR
- Down-listing [proposal](#) for razorback sucker out for public comment due September 7
- Strategic Plan work session in October

DRAFT NOTES

GRBNFCP Update – Bill Stewart, Bureau of Reclamation

- Policy Committee turnover
 - Julie Carter replacing Chris Cantrell
 - Brian Hickerson replacing Tony Robinson temporarily while his position is being filled

Program status update

- Current strategic plan ends next year
- Work plan is developed based on the strategic plan, after which implementation happens and products/reports are prepared for each project

Progress toward [Strategic Plan](#) goals

- Scientific foundation
 - Novel nonnative control
 - Male investigations – YY male for red shiner and green sunfish; still working on identifying the sex marker for sunfish; last marker had 80% success
 - Working with USGS and NAU (Eric Frye) on investigating use of ammonia; found that it takes about 2-3 weeks to get back to baseline after treatment
 - Path to registration is not clear right now
 - Rotenone clears out faster
 - Additional funding to do crayfish studies, but this study is essentially done now
 - Moveable barrier investigations – water gate system, hoping to field test in late summer/early fall; can customize size and rolls up compactly, uses the weight of the water to fill and dam the stream
 - Life history knowledge: Kansas State University study looking at range-wide spinedace and loach minnow assessment
 - Spinedace and loach minnow propagation: ARCC experimenting with spawning density
 - Genetic management plan: Funded Gila Topminnow genetics study
 - Stocking strategies for repatriated fish
 - Good survival for spinedace in the hatchery
 - Looking at movement and survival of PIT-tagged fish
- Preventing extinction and recovery of priority species
 - Identify critical streams and populations for protection/repatriation
 - ASU topminnow holding facility and ARCC

- Did recent genetics work to look at the populations at the ASU facility; Monkey Springs lineage had some hybridization, so may have been some contamination between tanks
 - Lost some lineages
 - Albuquerque BioPark is an option for the future
- Protect native fish from nonnative fish: constructed 8 barriers to date, investigating 5 other possible locations
- Remove nonnative threats: work done in 8 different locations including Sweetwater Dam, Blue River, and Red Tank Draw; removed bullhead from Aravaipa
- Replicate populations and their associated native fish community: many stockings and post stocking monitoring; majority of the effort is currently going toward meeting this goal
- Easements, land, or water rights to protect key surface water
 - Need to put more effort here
 - Little to no work has been done on this yet
 - Next step: gather list of potential areas for protection to be ready when funding comes along
 - Some money set aside for stock tanks, but there was not enough interest to implement
 - Looked at water rights on Aravaipa, but cost is too high; more achievable for smaller streams
- Protect, maintain, and restore degraded habitats to use for native fish: Blue River and Bear Creek fish salvage
- Inform and educate the public: education in the classroom, but have been limited by COVID over the last year
- Monitoring
 - Monitoring plan completed (next 10 years)
 - eDNA included for some locations where needed
 - Ongoing collection of eDNA markers
 - CCAST participation
- Program tracking records: Work Plan; accomplishments presented in annual reports, publications, etc.
- Since the start of the project, have spent over \$14 million on protecting native fish populations; \$550K+ each year

FY22 Work Plan – *Bill Stewart, Bureau of Reclamation, Doug Duncan, US Fish and Wildlife Service*
Guidance Document

- Working on the process created last year to review and approve projects
- Will be part of the new Strategic Plan
- Opportunity to discuss changes/edits over the next year; **Carrie will send out again**

Review of project proposals

- Funding reduced to \$553K; likely will be more restricted to \$550K moving forward
 - Additional 5 years were added to the program recently (until 2027)
 - Need to think about projects that could last beyond 2027
- Only two projects (ASU topminnow and West Fork Black River nonnative removal) will not be able to get funded
 - ASU topminnow: can't fund after April 2022; fish would either get moved or destroyed, based on representation of the lineages elsewhere

Recommendation

- Sean motioned, seconded by Kirk, and unanimously passed to approve the FY22 work plan.

Updates

- Fish barrier update
 - Sediment removal on the Blue River at the barrier, removed beaver dam on Bonita Creek
 - New barrier to be put in at Eagle Creek (FMI, FWS, USBR), NEPA initiation this fall

- Working on Wild and Scenic Suitability Report on Verde River, then will move forward with NEPA
- Possibility for work on the Pleasanton Diversion on San Francisco River (in Gila NF, but access is through private property); nearby landowner was supportive, has done fish barrier work with Natural Channel Designs; will send out a report soon
- Native fish monitoring
 - Plan is complete and available
 - Variable frequency based on location
 - Finishing nonnative fish monitoring right now, and will have a report by the end of the year
 - eDNA work is finishing up; hope is that it will help to supplement canal monitoring
- ARCC & Hatchery
 - Got co-op agreement; available to the department in May
 - Will have meetings with Ryan Mann on how to move forward (Phase 3: construction)
 - Funds have to be spent by August 2022
- White Mountain Apache Tribe loach minnow
 - Came up in a Miner Flat meeting recently
 - Passed internal deadlines for processing agreements last week, so wouldn't be able to get anyone in the field until December
 - Will be a 5 year agreement
- I&E update
 - Still providing funding for native fish in the classroom
 - Working on a field guide
 - Freshwater Illustrated agreement in the works
 - Updating website regularly
- Recovery plans and species status assessment updates
 - Loach minnow: no update
 - Spikedace: no update
 - Gila Topminnow: meeting weekly to write up the SSA by end of September
 - Gila chub: CBD will petition FWS to expand critical habitat (falls under Administrative Procedures Act)
 - Roundtail chub: under court order to complete the SSA; 12 month finding due by March 31, 2022
 - Desert Pupfish: no active efforts; on the road to being de-listed
 - Razorback suckers: **down-listing [proposal](#) out for public comment right now, by September 7**

Strategic Plan next steps – Bill Stewart, Bureau of Reclamation

- Get it ready to review by the March Policy Committee meeting; finalize in fall 2022
- Need to consider the fact that this project will be wrapping up in 2027, based on USBR funding availability; this will be a big focus with this Strategic Plan
 - USBR consultation expires in 2023, so it will need to be reinitiated (garter snake and yellow-billed cuckoo impacts)
 - Doug will likely be doing the consultation
 - Canal monitoring and barriers are still good under the last consultation
- Need to discuss if there will be new goals or if they need to be update/changed
- **Meet as a Policy Committee one additional time to discuss what has/hasn't worked and reassess the previous goals around October**
 - Possibility for an in-person meeting if needed
 - Then present to Technical Committee in December