

GILA RIVER BASIN NATIVE FISHES CONSERVATION PROGRAM

Joint Meeting of Policy and Technical Committees; 5/8/2017 Meeting Notes

Attendees:

Jim deVos (AGFD; Policy Committee member)
Steve Spangle (USFWS; Policy Committee member)
Sean Heath (BOR; Policy Committee member)
Mike Sloan (NMGFD; Policy Committee member); via conference call
Tony Robinson (AGFD; Technical Committee member)
Bill Stewart (BOR; Technical Committee member)
Doug Duncan (USFWS; Technical Committee member)
Mike Ruhl (NMGFD; Technical Committee member); via conference call
Tim Frey (BLM-NM; Technical Committee member, ex-officio); via conference call
Yvette Paroz (USFS; Technical Committee member, ex-officio); via conference call
Chris Cantrell (AZGFD)
Julie Carter (AZGFD)
Kent Mosher (AZGFD)
Brian Ferguson (NMGFD); via conference call
Mary Richardson (USFWS)

1. Gila River Basin Native Fish Conservation Program Overview Presentation

Doug Duncan gave a presentation summarizing the success and recommendations for improving how the GRBNFCP measures and tracks accomplishments. This topic will be discussed at the Technical Committee workshop. Doug hopes to write a paper/report on accomplishments to date. Bill Stewart raised a question about priority species. Doug explained that the Biological Opinion identified jeopardy for four species (Spikedace, Loach Minnow, Gila Topminnow, and Razorback Sucker), and that in a subsequent opinion Gila chub were added. However work on all Gila River Basin native warm-water fish species can be done. Desert Pupfish and Gila Topminnow have similar habitat requirements, so Desert Pupfish are often stocked into the same locations as topminnow. Doug has evaluated the percentage of recovery tasks completed for species under the CAP program and presented graphs summarizing that information. He also presented information regarding the success of re-establishment projects, and which species have benefited from stream renovations. The recommendation was made that, for the upcoming CAP workshop, the team re-evaluate how to improve tracking of project benefits to species, including: 1) identifying all species that benefit from each task; 2) listing applicable recovery plan tasks accomplished; 3) looking at projects that might benefit the razorback sucker; 4) conducting a complete recovery accounting of actions funded basin-wide, including New Mexico, to assess which recovery tasks have been implemented; and 5) publishing a review of the GRBNFCP in a peer-reviewed journal.

2. Program funding status and Recommendations from Tech Committee on FY18 projects

The group reviewed the handout that summarized the funding outlays and projects for 2016, 2017, and the proposed funding outlay and projects for 2018. Historical tracking of projects has been a challenge. Bill is working on a better way to track projects and would like to set up something similar to many of the other Reclamation funded programs in the Colorado River basin where there are annual work plans and reports that summarize each year's work. For this year, Tony explained there were only two new projects to be added from the approved list last year: Eagle Creek repatriation and Nonnative Removals from Devils Canyon. Reclamation and Freeport McMoran are scheduled to build a barrier in Eagle Creek in 2018, after which repatriations of spikedace and loach minnow could occur. Mary Richardson indicated that there were plans (USFWS, USFWS, and AGFD) to collect eDNA samples from Eagle Creek to provide more evidence for the presence or absence of Spikedace and Loach Minnow. Tony indicated that the nonnative removal from Devils Canyon is contingent upon getting approval from State Land Department. Jim deVos indicated that AGFD and State Land Department were meeting and had met in the past relative to species releases on State Lands. Also, that it is the mission of State Lands to manage lands to optimize economic return to Trust beneficiaries. Because the project cannot move forward until some kind of agreement with State Lands is worked out, this project should not be a priority. Can leave on list and indicate that implementation is pending approval from state lands.

The Policy committee voted unanimously to fund the FY2018 projects as specified in the handout.

3. Reclamation administration of program update and feedback

In 2016, Reclamation took over acquisition administration of almost the entire program previously known as 'The Funds Transfer Program.' Previous administration of "The Funds Transfer Program" was done through a single interagency agreement between Reclamation and FWS that transferred funds for identified tasks or "blurbs" approved by the Policy Committee. The FWS would then create anywhere from five to eight sub-agreements with various agencies for implementation of tasks. Bill indicated that some of the partner-funding agreements are still being developed. He also indicated that the agreement modification with AGFD and NMDGF is in the works, but that several things slowed it down. However, AGFD will get two years of funding, NMDGF will get three years of funding this year, and the remaining of the ASU topminnow holding agreement will be funded. This means that next year there will not be a need for a modification unless there is a change to the scope of work. Steve Spangle and Sean Heath indicated that under new direction from Department of Interior, all awards over \$100,000 had to be reviewed by the Office of Secretary of Interior. It was unknown how long that could extend the timeline to finalize agreements.

Chris Cantrell provided an example of the Reclamation agreement for MSCP, and how AGFD was being asked to provide a high amount of detail in both agreement proposals and financial reports, which resulted in a considerable amount of administrative time for AGFD. That administrative time needs to be added to the agreement. It was

recommended that a follow up meeting/call with the Reclamation grants officer was needed.

4. Outcomes of program survey

Bill explained that Wildlife Management Institute reviewed the program and submitted a report in 2005. The report had 44 recommendations. At the December 2016 CAP Technical Committee, Bill provided the recommendations to the meeting attendees and asked that they rate each from 1 to 5. Bill had a handout of the results. Doug suggested that the Technical Committee review this at the workshop scheduled for August 2017, and then provide recommendations to the Policy Committee. Jim deVos indicated that the Policy Committee could then provide direction and priorities to implement those that drive the program. Jim asked that the Technical Committee bring back those recommendations on issues key to the implementation of the program (rather than administration).

5. 5-year strategic plan and knowledge assessment workshop

Bill indicated that there have been two 5-year strategic plans, and that the current one expires in 2017. So a new 5-year strategic plan needs to be developed by the end of the year. Bill indicated that a workshop was being set up to review program progress, successes, and how to make improvements. The first day would be devoted to reviewing the work the Gila River Basin Native Fish Conservation Program has done to date and to see what is working and what is not. The second day would be devoted to new approaches and technologies that might help the program implement recovery. Julie recommended that metrics for measuring success be set up, and Doug agreed. Bill is still trying to finalize an agreement to hire a facilitator for the workshop. He expects the facilitator to be on board by the end of May. Jim volunteered an AZGFD facilitator in case Reclamation could not finalize the contract. The meeting will likely be held in Flagstaff in August 2017.

6. Streams monitoring contract update

Tony indicated that the current Streams Monitoring Contract between Reclamation and AGFD is ending on June 19, 2017. The report and deliverables will be done on time. Bill indicated that Reclamation had sent out a Sources Sought Notice, for the next 5-year contract. There were a fair number of respondents. Reclamation could not comment further on the next contract.

7. ARCC update

Bill indicated that phase II of the construction at ARCC is beginning this week. A total of \$1.6 million was allocated for three phases of renovation; however, bids for the work came in lower than expected.

Chris asked FWS if take of gartersnakes could be covered under the Department's 10(a)(1)(A)a permit, rather than a separate BA and BO. Steve indicated that the reason that it was not was that there was a difference between incidental and intentional take. The 10(a)(1)(A) permit was for intentional take, whereas the BO associated with the project BA was for incidental take.

Jim and Chris explained that a complex of facilities (Bubbling Ponds Hatchery, page Springs Hatchery, ARCC, and new Page property) was on one property, and that the plan was to manage the property as one, and not as separate units. The new property will have priorities for native aquatic species. Chris is currently developing a comprehensive plan for all of the facilities at the property. It was noted that there is a wide variety of funding sources including Heritage, Dingell-Johnson, Wildlife Conservation Fund, and funding from programs such as CAP or MSCP. Jim stated that, moving forward there will be a higher emphasis on native fishes and reptile and amphibian recovery.

8. Fish barrier update

Bill and Sean indicated that Reclamation was not moving forward with the O'Donnell Canyon barrier because of opposition from Audubon, who manages the land.

Bill indicated that the Eagle Creek barrier, which is co-funded with Freeport McMoran is scheduled to be built in 2018. Reclamation is still working to acquire land from State Land Department where the Redfield Canyon barrier would be built, potentially in 2018. Reclamation, FWS, USFS, and AGFD are going to the Verde River next week to assess two possible barrier locations and discuss nonnative fish control and native fish management. A barrier constructed near the Sycamore Creek confluence would protect approximately 40 miles of river. If barriers are built on Eagle Creek, Redfield Canyon and two on the Verde, then Reclamation will have met its obligation to construct 12 barriers under the 2008 BO. However, there is still the potential for a barrier in New Mexico on the upper Gila River. Reclamation will continue to look for additional sites in the event one of these barrier projects cannot be implemented.

Chris noted that the Santa Cruz Watershed Plan is underway and will likely be completed by September. The other watershed plans are being started simultaneously, and the goal is, by the end of the existing CAMP biological opinion, the entire State will have watershed plans completed so they can be used for the next stocking consultation.

A plan for New Mexico watershed management is posted on their website.

9. Ready-for-bid/contract project list, pending funding availability

Bill indicated that the Technical committee had met to develop a list of projects that could be funded if funds became available. These are not the Funds Transfer program conservation measures, but rather are from the other conservation measures (barriers), so are outside decisions of the Policy Committee. The tech committee identified and prioritized over 30 projects. If funds are available Reclamation will begin working down the list. Bill would like to build this project brainstorming/prioritization exercise into future technical committee meetings. Mary Richardson asked if other agencies or biologists could contribute ideas, and Bill replied yes. A list of top projects has been developed and includes: YY super male research; range-wide Spikedace and Loach Minnow eDNA collection; development of factors that determine stocking success and failure; continued testing of ammonia as a piscicide; and developing a plan for a mechanical removal "Hot Shot" crew available to respond when nonnatives are detected,

among others.

Decisions / Actions:

- Policy Committee voted unanimously to approve the FY2018 funding as outlined in the handout.

Assignments:

- The Technical Committee will discuss the WMI recommendation survey at the Workshop and prioritize recommendations for Policy Committee review.
- The Technical Committee will hold a workshop and use the results to draft a new 5-year strategic plan and to develop metrics and better tracking of metrics.
- Reclamation schedule a call or meeting for Q and A with acquisitions office.