

Meeting: Pecos River 2nd Restoration Project Pecos River Restoration at Overflow Wetlands EA

BLM Roswell Field Office, 2909 W. Second Street, Roswell, NM
August 3, 2011, 10:30AM

Attendees:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Agency</u>	<u>Email</u>
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Handouts: Draft Chapter 1; Agenda and aerial views of the proposed action

Introductions

The meeting began approximately 10:40 AM. Introductions were made by each individual in attendance. Ernie Lopez is another private landowner who has expressed interest in the project, but was not able to attend.

Update on status of EA

Marsha updated the group on the project status. There were four team meetings last year, including a site visit. A smaller group visited several potential sites on the river and a screening process was conducted. The Overflow Wetlands ACEC was determined to be the preferred location for the restoration project. Meeting notes and details on the other potential sites is posted on the Reclamation website.

Completed actions since the last meeting include:

May 11, 2011 - Another site visit to the preferred location was conducted by Yvette Paroz, Biologist and Reclamation engineer Mark Nemeth. Mark is developing the details of the proposed restoration.

May 17, 2011 - Cooperating agency invitations letters sent out.

May 24, 2011 - Interested parties letter sent out.

May 25, 2011 - Native American government-to-government letters sent out.

An internal draft of Chapter 1 was distributed along with a comment matrix for team review and comment. Marsha will distribute these electronically as well. All comments should be sent to Marsha by September 12.

Chapter 2 will be drafted based on the general project outlines and will be refined as more details become available. There will be a discussion of the alternative sites considered that were eliminated.

Project Description

Yvette discussed the last field trip to the site with Mark. The three mile river segment includes state trust lands, private lands, and BLM lands. BLM has completed non-native vegetation removal along the river in their sections. Reclamation is proposing to do vegetation removal on the state trust and private land sections, and look at some bank lowering on all sections. Mark noted that this is a viable and feasible site for restoration. With a limited amount of work and expense, there could be good benefits in restoring the 2.5 to 3 miles of the river to more natural conditions. Shiner populations are present and would benefit. The project is close to the Bitter Lake restoration project. The proximity to good upstream habitat would likely help improve the survival and breeding of shiner.

The handouts show some of the engineering concepts and locations. One element is to do bankline excavation to loosen up banks and encourage erosion. Reclamation would remove tamarisk mechanically. The BLM burn crew would burn the piles of debris onsite. Some brush would be placed to create in-river habitat. On the state trust land there will be areas on the east side of the river where the tamarisk would be cut and the stumps treated with herbicide where it would be beneficial to leave in some roots to keep bank stable and protect nearby wetlands (shown as purple on map).

A question was raised about what the desired geomorphic condition would look like in this area; is there a reference reach we are trying to emulate? Do we have an end point or is the goal just to allow the river to be more dynamic in this reach? Mark noted that the area will have to be monitored to ensure that it meets the restoration objectives (e.g., native vegetation, wider channel, provide for channel movement, sediment input). The shiner needs mobile sandy sediment, which requires inputs from the banks and side channels. There is not much data on the Pecos on what we can expect the channel to do in the long-term. The river is not functioning under a natural hydrograph and does not have as large base or flood flows as it did historically. Rather than losing control of the river, there is a bigger risk that the river will not be induced to erode enough and additional excavation work may be needed in the future.

There was a discussion about whether the project meets the intent of the requirements of the Pecos River operations biological opinion. The site was selected based on coordination between the Service and Reclamation. The Service is most concerned about finding the right combination of elements that would benefit the shiner. The benefits of this site include: proximity to good

habitat (about 10 miles from the Bitter Lakes restoration), the chance to do a larger reach, no intermittency expected at this site, a better chance of maintaining long-term site access, and the opportunity to partner with other agencies to create a good demonstration project.

A question was asked whether work would be done in phases. Plans are still being formulated but the tamarisk root removal would be the highest priority and could be completed in about 4 weeks. Reclamation needs to determine what measures might be needed to protect the gas line that crosses the river and to ensure that the function of the lower fish barrier and the USGS gage is maintained. Some consideration is also being given to cutting a secondary channel inside a large upper curve of the river. After construction, burning of the woody debris would follow. Revegetation with native grasses, baccharis and coyote willow is anticipated. Invasives such as kochia, ravenna grass and tamarisk will try to colonize – native grasses could slow that down. A flood event would help establish other natives such as alkali sacaton and four-winged saltbush. Adaptive management based on monitoring would continue into the future.

A maintenance plan would be needed. The BLM has needed to do some work on their cleared areas to stay ahead of resprouts and new growth. Smaller shoots are best removed by hand, rather than spraying. The NMSLO may be able to fund or maintain the restoration on its lands and small grants may also be available for work on private land.

Construction staging areas have yet to be determined. It may be possible to stage on private land. The NMSLO is working on an MOU for access and use of state lands. A longer term MOU is desired over obtaining short-term rights of entry.

Section 404/401 Requirements

Reclamation will coordinate with the US Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the NMED for compliance with the Clean Water Act. This project will likely meet the requirements for authorization and Section 404 compliance under the Corps' Nationwide Permit (27) (Stream and Wetland Restoration Activities), just as the work at Bitter Lake did. That process can proceed when the project is better defined. The permit will require a minimum commitment of five years of monitoring and Section 401 Water Quality Certification to ensure that the project complies with New Mexico water quality standards. The Section 401 certification is completed by the NMED Surface Water Quality Bureau after the Corps makes its determination.

ESA

There was a question about benefits to other species, including special status species. Opening up the river would have immediate benefits to many species. Just removing the thicket of growth around the river has been shown to increase wildlife access and use. There should be benefits to waterfowl as well as birds that use grasslands. There is potential for interior least terns in open sandy areas, as they do nest at Bitter Lake. There is possibility of doing some sculpting of the land planting of the Pecos Sunflower. The project will avoid impacting measures protecting the Pecos Pupfish population in the Overflow Wetlands.

Depletions

There will need to be a calculation of depletions that may be associated with the restoration and increased surface area in the channel subject to evaporation. The NMISC's Strategic Water

Reserve could cover any depletions. The approach used for Bitter Lake could be done here. A water budget is determined and estimated depletions are included in the EA. Accounting is based on post-project monitoring and rights transferred if water is owed. There are gages at the top and the bottom of the reach proposed for restoration, although the lower gage is inaccurate and needs to be fixed.

Schedule/Action Items

- Marsha to distribute Chapter 1 and comment table electronically – comments due to her by September 12.
- Reclamation to continue refining the proposed action. Detailed design due in the Fall.
- EMPSi/Tetra Tech to continue with outlining and preparing sections of the EA using available information.
- Next meeting scheduled for November 17th at 10:30 AM at the BLM in Roswell.