



United States Department of the Interior

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IN REPLY REFER TO:
ALB-184
ENV-7.00

AUG 31 2015

Mr. Wally Murphy
Field Supervisor
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New Mexico Ecological Services Field Office
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Subject: Submission of Revised Joint Biological Assessment for Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Non-Federal Water Management and Maintenance Activities on the Middle Rio Grande, New Mexico (Cons. #02ENNM00-2013-F-0033)

The Bureau of Reclamation submits this revision (enclosed) to its July 31, 2012, Biological Assessment (BA) submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and amended on January 15, 2013, and August 8, 2013. While formal consultation was initiated on February 22, 2013 per your letter of February 25, 2013, with this final BA submittal Reclamation requests the formal consultation period for issuance of a Biological Opinion (BO) begin again upon receipt of this memo.

This BA includes Reclamation's, the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA), the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District's (MRGCD), and the State of New Mexico's (State) water management actions taken in the Middle Rio Grande (MRG), as well as State actions in the Upper Rio Grande in New Mexico. The addition of the BIA proposed actions in this BA occurred through a May 21, 2015 letter (enclosed) received from the BIA requesting to be included in the consultation. The BA also includes Reclamation's River and Infrastructure Maintenance and Restoration Program, other Reclamation MRG Project maintenance actions, including the Delta Channel, and the MRGCD's and State's proposed maintenance actions. The BA provides descriptions of specific measures to offset adverse effects and provide conservation benefits for listed species and critical habitat (defined in the BA as Offsetting Measures and Conservation Measures, respectively) proposed by Reclamation, BIA, the MRGCD, and the State, including establishment of a Recovery Implementation Program (RIP).

The BA analyzes effects on listed species in the action area: the Rio Grande silvery minnow (*Hybognathus amarus*; silvery minnow), the Southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*; flycatcher), the yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*; cuckoo), the New Mexico meadow jumping mouse (*Zapus hudsonius luteus*; jumping mouse), the Pecos sunflower (*Helianthus paradoxus*, sunflower), and the interior least tern (*Sternula antillarum athalassos*, tern).

Starting in 2009, Reclamation, the MRGCD, the State, and other Collaborative Program participants began taking steps toward development of a RIP, which would include an adaptive management-based approach designed to address scientific and management uncertainty and make progress towards recovery of endangered species. On July 18, 2013, the Collaborative Program's Executive Committee (EC) endorsed the foundational documents for the RIP, and updates to the Program Document have been ongoing during 2015. Formal commitment to participate in the RIP will occur once an agency executes the RIP Cooperative Agreement, which is expected to occur after the Service issues the final BO for this consultation.

While Reclamation fully anticipates that all parties to this consultation will formally commit to participate in the RIP, if any one should choose not to do so, commitments described in this BA are still intended to facilitate coverage for the proposed actions under the new BO.

In support of the proposed measures in the BA that offset adverse effects and provides conservation benefits for listed species and critical habitat, Reclamation is proposing a new approach of River Integrated Operations using Adaptive Management (RIO). The RIO approach would take into account the four focus areas that the Service has identified as necessary to improve the status of the silvery minnow. These focus areas include: (1) A draft Hydrologic Objective (HO) developed by the Service, (2) habitat restoration, (3) river reconnectivity, and (4) conservation water storage. The use of a defined Adaptive Management (AM) process is supported by AM policy within the Department of the Interior. Development of a defined AM process for the MRG, integrated with ongoing AM efforts in the basin, will help to reduce uncertainties over time and improve our collective understanding of how to achieve sustainable management of the MRG.

Reclamation's proposed operation of the San Juan-Chama Project (SJC Project) is described in this BA and includes only the release of SJC Project water from Heron Reservoir, the storage and release of SJC Project water from El Vado Reservoir, and MRGCD storage and release of SJC Project water in Abiquiu Reservoir. Due to the beneficial effects from these actions for listed species and critical habitat, and the absence of adverse effects, as SJC Project water is additional non-native water in the system, Reclamation would not normally include these actions in a request for formal consultation. However, Reclamation is requesting informal consultation and concurrence from the Service on SJC Project actions in this BA as part of the larger programmatic consultation, for efficiency and to provide a more holistic view of management actions in the MRG basin.

The BA consists of the following parts: (1) Part I includes the introduction, action area, and foundational information that applies for all proposed actions; (2) Part II includes Reclamation's, BIA's, MRGCD's, and the State's specifically-described programmatic water management actions and their anticipated effects; (3) Part III includes a programmatic description of Reclamation's River and Infrastructure Maintenance and Restoration Program as well as State and MRGCD restoration and maintenance activities and their anticipated effects; (4) Part IV includes Reclamation's, BIA's, MRGCD's, and the State's proposed measures to offset adverse effects of the Proposed Actions on the silvery minnow and provide conservation benefits for listed species and critical habitat; and (5) Part V provides the BA's overall determination of effects to Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed species, as required by section 7, and various procedural considerations related to this consultation. The procedural considerations included in Part V address a framework for streamlined ESA compliance for future tiered consultations. Reclamation looks forward to developing the details of this process collaboratively with the Service during the consultation. Part V also includes a proposal for a 15-year timeframe for this programmatic consultation; a proposal for an option to extend this programmatic consultation beyond the initial 15-year term; and the role of the RIP as a Conservation Measure to address multiple species and river system considerations and to facilitate ESA compliance.

This letter and enclosures can be found on the Reclamation website at <http://www.usbr.gov/uc/albuq/envdocs/ba/MRG/index.html>.

We look forward to working cooperatively with the Service through this ESA consultation process, including identifying an appropriate timeframe for completion of the BO. Reclamation will also support the Service's analysis needs during the course of this consultation, including providing additional data if it becomes available. Please direct any questions to Ms. Leann Towne of my staff at 505-462-3579.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Faler
Area Manager

Enclosures – 2

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(w/o encl to each)