

**Flaming Gorge Technical Working Group**  
**May 10, 2012, 10:00 p.m.**  
**Meeting Record**

Attending:

US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) –Kevin McAbee

Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program (Recovery Program)–Jana Mohrman, Kevin Bestgen

Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) – Heather Hermansen, Malcolm Wilson, Dave Speas

Western Area Power Administration (Western) – Clayton Palmer, Jerry Wilhite

Argonne National Lab – Kirk LaGory

Reclamation updated the group on current Green and Yampa River hydrology. The May final forecast for the April through July unregulated inflow into Flaming Gorge Reservoir is 630,000 acre-feet, which corresponds with a moderately dry hydrologic classification. The combined April through July forecast of the Yampa River at Maybell and Little Snake at Lily is 541,000 acre-feet. This forecast would fall into the dry hydrologic classification of the 2006 Record of Decision on the Operation of Flaming Gorge Dam Final Environmental Impact Statement (ROD). Based on the reliance of Yampa River flows to meet Reach 2 targets, the proposed flow and temperature objectives are to meet the dry hydrologic targets outlined in the LTSP. The LTSP Reach 2 targets are for one to six days of at least 8,300 cfs flows measured on the Green River at Jensen, Utah.

Reclamation discussed the possibility of increasing the daily ramp rates to increase the opportunity that Flaming Gorge releases could augment Yampa River flows during larval presence and meet the dry targets this year. While the 1992 Biological Opinion did limit the ascent rate to no more than 400 cfs, the ROD does not specify an ascent rate. There is a practical ramp rate of 800 cfs/hr that has been adhered to historically outside of spring operations for safety reasons, but has not been documented as the “official” hourly ramp rate. Likewise, the daily increase at Flaming Gorge to spring releases has historically been between 1,500 cfs and 2,000 cfs per day. Reclamation asked the biologists if, during larval presence, an increase in the daily release would negatively affect endangered species downstream. The Service and Kevin Bestgen both agreed that the goal was to release water when needed to entrain larvae in the connected floodplains.

The FGTWG understands Reclamation needs to consider the balance between recovery of endangered fish and the needs of all stakeholders, including the anglers, landowners and rafters downstream. While an increase in ramp rate may not have an impact on endangered fish, Reclamation needs to consider all the impacts when making a final decision. The FGTWG is the forum to discuss impacts to endangered fish.

The Service reported that a discussion with Tom Chart before the call indicated that there has been no detection of larval presence to date. Further, biologists report that larvae have not yet been detected in the Colorado River either.

Kevin Bestgen reported that the earliest documented first capture on May 19, 1992, is still a few days out. Kevin has a predictive model that suggests it should happen any day. The fish respond to cumulative degree-days for reproduction rather than flows.

Kevin Bestgen discussed the benefit of waiting for Flaming Gorge releases in Reach 2 in order to entrain the greatest densities of larvae in the floodplains. Quickly increasing Flaming Gorge releases at the first appearance of larvae would miss the greatest density of fish. Western and Kevin Bestgen discussed the assumption is the larvae are normally distributed rather than uniformly distributed and the LTSP trigger is at the first presence of larvae. Reclamation commented that the response time to increase releases after the first presence of larvae is at least two days for public notification and then additional days of ramp up. This schedule is consistent with the goal of entraining the greatest density of larvae because the timing of peak flows would coincide with increasing density of larvae. Kevin Bestgen predicted that the first emergence of larvae might be 4-7 days away.

Kevin Bestgen is concerned that the combination of Flaming Gorge releases and Yampa River flows will provide zero days at 8,300 cfs this year because of the dry conditions. Western reiterated that the goal is the implementation of the LTSP this year and over the next few years. Western supports using bypass to meet the flows outlined in the LTSP matrix. Kevin Bestgen agreed and asked if Reclamation is planning to use the bypass this year.

Reclamation asserted that the ROD clearly states that bypass releases would not be used to meet flow targets in moderately dry and dry years. However, the LTSP recommends experimental releases and is not a long-term management plan, and doesn't conflict with current NEPA requirements and ROD commitments.

Reclamation confirmed with the group that because of conditions primarily in the Yampa River, the official hydrologic classification this year is dry. Reclamation also proposed discussing base flows and the letter the Service distributed before the call because base flow conditions would likely occur before the next FGWTWG conference call. The Service indicated a preference of designating spring targets as dry because of the Yampa River, and using the flexibility in the ROD to designate base flows under the moderately dry classification that corresponds with unregulated inflow into Flaming Gorge.

The Service believes higher base flows have scientific support to benefit Colorado pikeminnow, and further believes this year may be a critical one for the pikeminnow. The base flow request is similar to previous years, where base flows through September 30 are calculated using the maximum 40% of the average daily base flow. The request is for Reach 2 flows to fall in the moderately dry base flow range of 1,100 cfs to 1,500 cfs. The Service requests that Reclamation protect base flows and attempt to keep Reach 2 releases above 1,000 cfs. Western supports assisting the pikeminnow under its ESA commitments, but does plan to submit a non-ESA request for summer base flows to Reclamation.

The Service reiterated that the letter uses the same language provided last year in terms of Reclamation meeting sufficient progress through implementation of the LTSP experiment. The letter only addresses the experiment during 2012. The FGTWG acknowledged that long-term compliance or potential supplemental NEPA is something that will need further discussion.

The Service relayed a final piece of information from Tom Chart and the Recovery Program. Elkhead Reservoir did not spill this year. The dry year is a good year for smallmouth bass reproduction, but lack of spillway releases means no bass would escape from the reservoir into the river. The Recovery Program is committed to leasing an additional 2,000 acre-feet in addition to the annual 5,000 acre-feet from Elkhead Reservoir.

The next meeting is scheduled on June 14, 2012 at 10:00 a.m.