

Razorback Sucker Augmentation at NAPI Grow-Out Ponds

Fiscal Year 2022 Project Proposal

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Background

The Long-Range Plan for recovery of endangered fishes in the San Juan River calls for propagation and augmentation of razorback sucker, *Xyrauchen texanus*¹⁷, (RBS). East Avocet, West Avocet and Hidden ponds on Navajo Agricultural Products Industry (NAPI) lands will grow out RBS for stocking into the San Juan River in 2022.

Avocet Pond was originally a single pond built for watering cattle. On March 2, 1998 Avocet was divided into 2 ponds known as Avocet East and West. Avocet West is 3.4 acres and holds 18 acre-feet of water. Avocet West had a siphon for draining the pond. Avocet East is 3.52 acres and holds 19.6 acre-feet of water. Avocet East had no siphon when the ponds were divided, so draining was accomplished by renting a battery of water pumps. A siphon was installed in Avocet East during FY 2008 and the water can now be managed independent of Avocet West and without the need for pumping.

In October of 1999, Hidden Pond was built to rear razorback sucker. Hidden Pond is 2.83 acres. The dam was breached due to a storm event and the fish were lost. The dam was re-built in FY 2000 and a toe drain and spillway were built to protect the dam. Hidden Pond was lined with bentonite and contoured and a kettle was installed to facilitate fish harvest. A siphon was installed in July 2003. A salamander fence was installed around the Hidden Pond perimeter in August of 2003 to exclude predatory tiger salamanders.

Responsibility for Management of the NAPI ponds was originally shared between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Keller-Bliesner Engineering¹⁴ and Ecosystems Research Institute. The Service was responsible for determining which ponds would receive RBS and when. In addition, the Service conducted sample counts and harvested the ponds with the assistance of the BIA. Keller-Bliesner was responsible for design and construction of the Six Pack ponds and re-construction of Hidden Pond. The BIA was responsible for monitoring water quality and Ecosystems Research was responsible for fertilization of the ponds and for developing a pond management plan.

Original pond management was for multiple cohorts to be raised in the ponds. Harvesting would be done passively with fyke nets so that the ponds would not be drained on an annual basis. In FY 2007, it was determined to change pond management direction. All of the ponds would be drained and harvested and single cohort management would replace the multiple cohort approach. During the first harvesting and draining of a Six-pack Pond, high mortality resulted when the number of fish remaining in the pond could not be removed before they succumbed to the rapidly warming water. Adjustments were made to reduce the mortality in future harvesting and draining events. The adjustments consisted of increasing the trapping effort prior to de-watering to reduce the number of fish remaining in the pond. In addition, the final fish removal would be accomplished with a higher pool of water to slow the warming of the water

during the time of final harvest. This resulted in less mortality.

The Navajo Nation Department of Fish and Wildlife (NNDFW) was contracted to assume responsibility for daily management of the NAPI ponds in 2007. The Service assists the NNDFW with pond harvest as needed.

The ponds have been fenced and electric lines have been installed at each of the ponds. Aerators have been installed at each of the ponds to improve water quality. Water quality issues have caused fish mortalities in some of the ponds in the past. Water quality issues appear to have been much improved since the installation of the 2016 aerators and air lines.

Objectives

(NAPI Ponds Management)

Manage razorback sucker grow-out in East Avocet, West Avocet, and Hidden ponds to provide an additional source of RBS to supplement the augmentation program. Harvest, Passive Implant Transponder (PIT) tag, and stock razorback sucker from the three grow-out ponds into the San Juan River, in order to assist in fulfilling the tasks and objectives outlined in the current version of *An Augmentation Plan for Razorback Sucker in the San Juan River* (Ryden 2003).

- 1) Manage three grow-out ponds using a single cohort strategy; including passive and active harvest techniques. Our passive harvest percentage is at 3% and active harvest number is at 100% of fish removed. Increasing Fyke net use for this year per pond from 2 to 4, this will aide with our passive harvest numbers percentage increase.
- 2) Annually stock 3,500 (\geq 200mm) razorback sucker per pond.
- 3) Harvest all ponds on an annual basis.
 - a. All Razorback Sucker will be scanned for a PIT tag and the number will be recorded. If tag cannot be detected, fish will be implanted with a PIT tag prior to stocking into the San Juan River¹.
 - b. From recent conversations among the Biology Committee, it has been decided that stocking of any Razorback <300mm TL into the San Juan River will no longer be acceptable².
 - c. Stock ~ 4,200 to 6,300 fish based on 40-60% return.
 - 3c. Investigate and utilize multiple stocking localities. Locations are determined by USFWS, but PNM release site is a constant location for stocking²².
- 4) With discussion and agreement between the Biology Committee, Program office and Navajo Nation we have decided that if there are less than 1,000 RBS under the 300mm TL bench mark will be held over in one of the designated ponds until they reach stockable size. If there are more than 1,000 RBS then we will be stocked out down at Paiute farms below the water fall.

Location

The RBS grow-out ponds are located in Block III of Region 2 on NAPI lands, south of Farmington, New Mexico. Avocet East and West are located NW of the intersection of N 4062 and N 4087, which is approximately 3 miles southwest of the Ojo Amarillo NHA Housing Subdivision. Hidden Pond is located SE of the intersection of N 4087 and N 4095 approximately 1 mile northwest of the NAPI Region II Complex.

Methods/Approach

The NNDFW will be responsible for overall management of the NAPI ponds regarding daily management duties, harvesting, and stocking. The Service, Region 2, will be responsible for coordinating the stocking of the ponds with Southwestern Native Aquatic Resource and Recovery Center⁴ and NNDFW per US Fish and Wildlife Service Region 2 stocking policy. The NNDFW will be responsible for daily management of the three grow out ponds on NAPI with assistance by the Service, Region 2. Harvesting, tagging, and stocking will be conducted by NNDFW, with assistance from the Service if additional personnel are needed. Associated data management and reporting for the project will be handled by staff from the NNDFW.

Pond management requires that staff monitor and record water quality and quantity, and feed the fish on a daily basis. Water quality samples parameters include dissolved oxygen concentrations, pH, water temperature and conductivity. Measurements are taken twice a day from each corner of the ponds.¹⁰ Fish food calculations are calculated each month after sample counts have been conducted. Using the pond temperature, we are able to calculate the growth percentage and input that into the overall feed calculation and feeding rate. The calculation is $[(lbs./fish) * growth\ rate * total\ number\ of\ fish\ in\ pond]$ ¹⁵ In addition, staff manages water quantity to ensure that water quality is optimal. Maintenance includes operating and repairing valves and aerators, evaluating the pond perimeters for erosion problems, repairing fences, monitoring aquatic vegetation and maintaining a log book and database for management of the ponds.

During FY 2022, East Avocet, West Avocet, and Hidden ponds will be managed for a single cohort of RBS. During the FY 2021 East Avocet was split into two with a test of netting structure to keep fish separated. If this net is successful in keeping fish from crossing over then FY 2022 the Program Office and NNDFW will try to predator train RBS with putting catfish on one side and RBS on the other. NNDFW will implement passive harvest using fyke nets to trap, tag, and stock RBS into the SJR for several days or months prior to dewatering the ponds. As the ponds are dewatered, NNDFW and Service staff will work together to do the final RBS removal, tagging, and stocking into the SJR. As decided with SNARCC and NNDFW, we will be taking photos, tag number and measurements of any deformities seen while conducting active harvest. FY 2021 NMFWCO had resumed the flow training project to introduce a few RBS into a flow training tank, to simulate small river conditions prior to stocking. If successful the experiment will continue in FY 2022 with using increased numbers into the swim tank in hopes to prepare the fish for river like conditions.

Whenever the ponds are drained, they will be evaluated for structural stability. Areas away from ponds that may be impacted by dewatering will also be evaluated. Staff will identify and document any structural damage to the ponds and dewatering areas if necessary. Feasibility will determine whether improvements are made or not. This proposal does not include any maintenance or repair work that is major and requires mobilization of heavy equipment and is outside of the constraints of this budget.

Products/Schedule

In the spring of 2022, Southwest Native Aquatic Resources and Recovery in Dexter, NM will deliver 10,500 \geq 200 mm RBS to the three NAPI grow-out ponds. In the fall of 2022, the NAPI ponds will be de-watered and the RBS, which are targeted to be \geq 300 mm will be harvested and transported to the San Juan River for stocking. A database summarizing numbers of fish, stocking locations and PIT tag numbers will be submitted to the USFWS. A draft report will be submitted by 31 March 2023 and finalized by 1 June 2023.

Budget Justification

Increases in operating costs and consultant costs have been the large parts that have an increase in budget. The increase in operating costs overall went from \$4,561.07 to \$10,936.87. That increase includes amount of feed to have on station for potential over wintering of RBS went from \$1,300.00 to \$4,720.00. The consulting for pond treatments from Aquatic Consultants went from \$27,825 to \$31,927.50.

Budget Fiscal Year 2022 for the NAPI Ponds RBS Grow-out Ponds - NNDFW

Personnel (salary and benefits)	NNDFW
1 FTE Fisheries Biologist X \$48,720	\$48,720.00
Temporary Wildlife Technician	\$4,986.80
Fringe Benefits \$48,720.00 X .4656	\$22,684.03
Fringe Benefits Temp. @10.06%	\$501.67
Personnel Subtotal	\$76,892.50
Travel	
GSA Vehicle	\$13,392
Per Diem Lodging and Meals	\$3,725
Travel Subtotal	\$17,117
Brush Motor Batteries	\$346.92
Trickle Charger	\$59.99
Pond Shade Houses	\$700.00
LED Worklight	\$219.98
Mower Cover	\$79.99
2-34" HD Brush Blades	\$139.99
Rangen Fish Feed (3 MM and 4 MM)	\$4,720.00
Jib Craine Hoist x 2	\$4,500.00
3" X 3" X ½ X 20 Angle Iron	\$170.00
Support Subtotal	\$10,936.87
Consulting	31,927.50
Total	\$136,873.87
Administrative charge See IDC 18.7% Negotiated	\$21,721.00
Grand Total	\$158,594.87