

**Biology Committee Summary****January 29, 2021 1:00-3:00 pm MST**

**BC members:** Derek Fryer, Paul Badame, Dave Speas, Melissa Trammell, Harry Crockett, Pete Cavalli, Dale Ryden

**Interested Parties:** Kevin McAbee, Tildon Jones, Matt Fry, Colleen Cunningham, Travis Francis, Matt Breen, Julie Stahli, Christian Smith, Katie Creighton, Don Anderson, Zach Ahrens, Kevin Bestgen, John Hawkins, Mike Partlow, Ryan Christianson, Luke Gommermann, Keena Elbin, Gene Seagle, Leslie James

**CONVENED: 1:02 p.m.**

1. Review/modify agenda – the agenda was re-ordered as reads below.
2. Northern pike population estimates – Kevin McAbee summarized the work done by CPW, CSU, and FWS for northern pike abundance estimates in the Yampa River in 2019. The PIs were considering another estimate in 2021 because field work associated with Colorado pikeminnow estimates is not occurring, typically affording the crews more flexibility in performing northern pike work. Kevin spoke to Chris Smith and Tory Eyre about their offices' availability to conduct an estimate this year. The PDO and PIs are not recommending conducting northern pike estimates in 2021 because they would rather remove all northern pike collected this year. The lack of removal in 2020 likely means that crews will collect more pike than normal and the PIs want to remove those fish. Also this year has the possibility to be impacted by COVID-related travel restrictions, reducing field capacity; although at this time we expect all work can be completed. The authors of the report do believe these estimates are important and will discuss with what frequency these estimates should be conducted and will return to the BC with a recommendation. Field crews believe that northern pike estimates can be completed in years when the Colorado pikeminnow abundance estimates occur, so our options are more flexible than we originally thought. Dale agreed with an all removal approach. Several committee members agreed. Pete suggested waiting even longer than a year (4-5 yrs). Kevin said after he speaks with PIs, he would bring back the long-term plan to the committee. John Hawkins asked if we have sufficient information to suggest catch per unit effort is a reliable surrogate in place of abundance estimates, perhaps allowing us to assess pike trends more frequently between formal estimates. Kevin McAbee thought they tracked similarly in trends, but not at exactly the same rates. Kevin Bestgen said they could look into that, and both metrics are addressed in the report.
3. Final program guidance in FY22-23 funding – Julie clarified what we were expecting from this exercise. The goal is to set budget priorities and provide guidance to assist PIs

in drafting scopes of work, in order to avoid making changes later in the year (and re-writing SOWs). If the committee would like to solicit proposals from PIs, now is the time to request those.

Expansion of Project 130 SOW proposals for enhanced monitoring of lower Cataract Canyon - Katie Creighton distributed a document to the group that summarizes different options for work to monitor portions of Cataract Canyon below our long-term humpback chub monitoring sites. Tildon will attach the proposal with the meeting notes. Proposals included an expansion of geographical extent of existing work (#1), a separate trip in 'off-years' to monitor adult chub only in the area below the long term sites (#2), monitoring for young life stages of native fish in spring and summer (#3), and monitoring nonnative fish (#4). The current suggestion is for this work to occur in FY2022 (October 2021), not FY2023. Zach gave more details: Option 1) more effort allocated within existing chub monitoring project. This would involve reallocating effort from existing long-term monitoring sites by half to new sites downstream. This option would be budget neutral. Paul asked whether this would happen in Oct 2021. Zach said it would. There is no work scheduled for Oct. 2022 Option 2) augment current project with additional work. This would add one more trip. This would occur in Oct. 2022 when there are no standardized chub monitoring trips planned. This option would involve similar effort and cost but in a different reach (former reservoir reaches). Option 3) This is based on the BC's interest in monitoring for other species within the reach. Seining and light trapping would be used, potentially with electrofishing. Monitoring would be geared towards young razorback sucker and age-0 Colorado pikeminnow, and small humpback chub might also be encountered with these methods. They would also look into habitat measurements. This option would include a spring pass and summer pass in 2022. Katie clarified Option 3 would occur in May and August 2022 (typo in proposal summary document). Option 4) This option focuses on nonnative fish monitoring and removal, primarily aimed at walleye. UDWR recommended option 2, and secondarily adding option 3 to that if funding is available. Melissa asked if we could consider adding some nonnative fish removal back into the workplan when considering this proposal. Derek agreed. Melissa thought the idea is intriguing and was interested in investigating humpback chub in the reach. Dale compared this reach to western Grand Canyon and proposed hoop net sampling while UDWR is working in the area. He also suggested not limiting sampling to habitats traditionally considered as suitable for humpbacks. Melissa added that hoop nets are effective in western Grand Canyon because juvenile humpback chub are abundant there. Paul said there was another alternative not included—forego the scheduled sampling to sample the lower reach. The last sampling trip was 2019, so this would delay the next monitoring pass. Pete said it would appear we are starting with a small population in the currently sampled reach, and asked if we would expect to see many fish in the lower reach based on that small founder population. If we don't see fish, does it mean the habitat is not favorable or the species simply has not had time to expand? He added we have cut existing projects, and he would consider the new information from expanded sampling as ancillary compared to ongoing work that has

been cut. Dave thought these habitats have been available for longer, and fish have had a longer time to colonize the reach. He thought given the proposed downlisting for humpback chub, this project would be useful for assessing the species' status and distribution. Pete asked if it would be helpful in the absence of an abundance estimate, since all of the Cataract sampling relies on catch per effort. Kevin McAbee said it would be useful to have information on range for that population since we know the least about it. He stressed this is a one-time proposal for exploratory sampling. He admitted that a lack of captures would still leave uncertainty. Dave thought humpback chub trends in western Grand Canyon are exciting and made this work more appealing. Kevin added that if we do this exploratory sampling, we should not alter the current schedule for Project 130. Dave agreed. Julie said if this is where the BC wants to go, we will need Katie to add a task to their Project 130 SOW for consideration in July.

Dave asked about the sediment monitoring and how long we envision supporting it. He was intrigued by the potential relation between sediment and fish habitat. Harry indicated he was not clear what the sediment monitoring was telling us, but recent presentations were enlightening and he was supportive of the work. Melissa relayed that her NPS colleagues have expressed support for this work and consider it essential. Derek thought continuing this work might help us better understand the relationships between sediment and habitat.

Julie said the next step is the MC meeting in February. At their last meeting that committee asked for an update on general work plan revisions. Julie will present the major changes to them. This will then lead into the Post 2023 planning. Julie recommended BC members coordinate with their MC representatives to discuss the implications of this work plan and the revisions. We will then send out Program Guidance to PIs.

4. 2021 Green River flow request letter – Tom Chart reminded the committee that the deadline to submit our request to Reclamation is Feb. 28, and requested comments within two weeks from the BC. The letter this year is different than what we have submitted in prior years. Tom said we are currently prioritizing a smallmouth bass flow spike in moderately dry or drier hydrology, but the priorities shift if hydrology trends wetter. The drier scenarios include reverting to Muth et al. flow recommendations for spring operations and foregoing LTSP releases. Tom continued that this acknowledges the constraints on water availability in these drier conditions. He added we will post past letters on the website. Derek mentioned they held a pre-Technical Work Group (FGTWG) call to coordinate plans for spring. There were questions from the FGTWG on how these might be implemented. Melissa expressed support for the smallmouth bass flow spike, and pointed out we may need to confirm there is adequate funding allocated for the monitoring associated with this experiment. Tom said we would look into any fiscal issues related to this action. Melissa requested as much notice as possible if a flow spike will occur, so that monitoring crews can prepare. She asked about the when the Program began requesting the modified base flow (instead of the FWS Ecological

Services office) in the letter's appendix. >Tom will clarify in the letter. [PDO subsequently confirmed it was beginning 2016] Tom asked about WAPA's hydropower analysis. Derek said they are working on it with available data, and they are striving to report back before or at the letter deadline. The goal is to have that available for the committees when they consider approval of the letter. Melissa asked for the Argonne study results related to flows required to inundate smallmouth bass spawning habitats presented at the 2020 Researchers Meeting. >Derek will send to the BC. Dave was glad to see the smallmouth bass flow included. He thought there might be challenges. Dave mentioned Drought Contingency Plan pre-planning and whether that might influence these operations.

Tom Chart mentioned the Utah House Concurrent Resolution (HCR 1) concerning Flaming Gorge operations that was discussed in committee at the state legislature. Paul Badame indicated the resolution passed out of committee unanimously despite concerns expressed by Utah DNR staff. Program participants continue to remind those involved that 2011 flows were driven by unregulated Yampa flows, not releases for fish. Chris Keleher and Leslie James testified at the hearing. The Resolution likely now goes before a joint session of the Utah House and Senate for vote. Leslie mentioned she believed there was confusion over re-authorization of the Program in 2023 with the Flaming Gorge ROD. > Tildon will share a link to the audio recording of hearing and a bill tracker. *Done via email to the committee members.*

**ADJOURNED: 2:42 p.m.**