

Biology Committee Summary**March 16, 2021 9:00 am- 11:50 am MST**

BC members: Derek Fryer, AJ Keith, Harry Crockett, Paul Badame, Pete Cavalli, Dale Ryden, Dave Speas, Melissa Trammell, Tom Pitts

Interested Parties: Leslie James, Jojo La, Mike Partlow, Don Anderson, Bart Leeflang, Tom Chart, Colleen Cunningham, Melanie Fischer, Travis Francis, Matt Fry, Luke Gommerman, Katie Creighton, Keena Elbin, Kate Lawry, Matt Breen, Kevin McAbee, Brian Scheer, Gene Seagle, Chris Smith, Tildon Jones, Darek Elverud, Manuel Ulibarri, Kathy Callister, Ashley Jackson-Baillie

CONVENED: 9:02 a.m.

1. Review/modify agenda – the committee did not make changes to the agenda.
2. Introduction of AJ Keith – AJ introduced himself and provided some of his background. He will be representing the environmental interests on the BC. The committee introduced themselves to AJ and welcomed him to the group.
3. Flaming Gorge Hydropower Analysis Update – Derek explained that WAPA’s analysts have had multiple requests for different analyses, so they have contracted Argonne National Lab to assist with this work. Derek predicted a report might be available in August. Currently, WAPA is transferring data and bringing Argonne up to speed. Paul asked if the analysis would be used for the Post-2023 Report to Congress. The group didn’t think so. Leslie James asked if Derek had any updates related to the 2021 flow request letter. Derek said there were still uncertainties around hydrology and what that experiment will look like, particularly around timing. The agencies will work out the details through the Working Group meetings. Reclamation was also planning to incorporate the experiment into the May modeling for the 24 Month Study, which will help inform the analysis. Tom Chart asked if the Technical Working Group and Reclamation planned to share the Recovery Program’s flow request letter with the Working Group. Derek said the FGTWG proposal was to incorporate the flow request components, but he was unsure of the specific details they will forward to the FGWG. Dave Speas followed up via chat that the Recovery Program’s request letter would not be distributed to the Working Group.
4. White River Planning Update – Don said there has been quite a bit of activity in recent weeks around the White River planning process. Don described the different partners who are involved in the planning team. The group started with a list of potential recovery actions for the basin. In mid-February, the coordinators in the PDO began meeting with program element subgroups to analyze and review those possible activities. After reviewing and evaluating the options, the subgroups brought current and recommended future activities back to the larger group with explanations of feasibility, benefits, and

challenges. The planning team is currently reviewing the recommendations, after which the list will be brought to the BC and WAC. Don gave a preview of the recommended actions list. Don explained that flow protection was one of the more difficult issues since there are currently few options for providing or protecting flows in the White River, particularly during low flow conditions. Don also relayed that there were some feasible and possibly near-term options that came out of this exercise. AJ asked how the management plan would be incorporated into a PBO for the White River. Don explained that developing a PBO was the impetus for beginning this management planning. Don said the current assessment would serve as a good set of activities to look at what the Program should be considering for that basin. Don said the next step would be to look at what recovery actions should be implemented for the White River. Tom Chart continued by saying that conversations are still ongoing with the State of Colorado about the appropriate next steps and timing for a Plan and PBO. Harry asked about the nature of a PBO. Tom Chart said the PBO would likely be an intra-Service consultation with the federal action being the Service's signature on a cooperative agreement to implement the management plan.

5. Wetland operations for 2021– Tildon said that based on the flow request and current hydrology forecast, LTSP may not be implemented because smallmouth bass flow spike and CPM base flow would be prioritized under dry / moderately dry categories. So it is important to summarize what to do at wetlands if razorback sucker are not being entrained.
 - a. Matt Breen explained the Stewart Lake project would forego fish production this year, instead focusing on improving habitat so we can maximize fish production in future years. Specifically, UDWR proposes to work on cattail reduction. Mike Partlow explained that UDWR hopes to dry out cattails, recognizing that the water table may not allow for extreme drying. Previous years' control efforts were not successful because cattails were not flooded adequately after treatment. This year UDWR proposes to mow/crush the stalks before going to seed. Dry wetlands would allow them to use rented equipment, such as a tractor. Reclamation is also planning to replace the gate seals, and a dry wetland will facilitate scheduling and completing that action. Tildon explained that under the current proposal for 2021, the peak flow under a dry hydrology would likely occur before the razorback larval emergence. Pete asked if UDWR had considered a burn this year. Mike said although he would like to see it burned, Utah Forestry, Fire, and State Lands were not prepared for a training burn this spring. He hopes that we can schedule a burn in 2022. Matt described that if we did enact LTSP this year under drier hydrology, he would expect low production and a need to release fish early because the water would not persist in the wetland. Paul asked if we could still fix the gates if we implemented LTSP. Tildon said that if the wetland is used to raise fish, the gate seal would be replaced after the wetland is drained. Paul asked if the BC felt we should skip a year for fish production regardless of hydrology, to make these improvements. Dale was supportive of trying to improve habitat conditions so that we don't continue to work hard to

produce fish under less than ideal conditions. Melissa and Dave support the proposal to focus on habitat conditions this year. Tildon described that this proposal has been approved through the Stewart Lake working group and that they feel this will support long term selenium management as well. Bart mentioned trenching and burying the material or using a low profile dozer to plow and crush the vegetation. Pete asked about any budget changes for work planning and costs related to equipment options. Matt said most costs are personnel services, but the budget is in its infancy. Budget will be clarified once we understand the time and equipment needed. The BC approved refocusing efforts on habitat improvements. UDWR will work with folks to clarify exact treatment mechanisms as conditions are known.

- b. Ouray NWR (Johnson Bottom and Old Charley) - Similar to Stewart Lake, there is utility in drying Johnson Bottom to assist in improving habitat conditions in future years. In recent discussion with a fish stocking subgroup Old Charley is being considered as a soft release site for bonytail; taking advantage of peak flows in that wetland. If hydrology trends wetter, we can pivot and stock bonytail in other locations. Melissa suggested that the BC reconsider an earlier decision that bonytail not be stocked in wetlands managed for larval razorback sucker. She thought that earlier decision was intended to not confuse LTSP objectives, i.e., stocked bonytail preying on wild razorback sucker larvae. >The committee will take up this issue at a future meeting.

6. Humpback chub topics

- a. Currently Ouray NFH Grand Valley is holding 7 humpback chub in a pond, which takes up important hatchery space. Dale said it would be useful to have that pond space. The BC had previously suggested putting those fish back in the river, but some had suggested retaining them if they could contribute to a post-fire broodstock. However, the few number of fish in the pond is not genetically diverse enough for that purpose and concerns over runoff from burned areas are diminishing. Dale proposed returning the fish to Black Rocks; the BC agreed.
- b. Humpback chub translocation into DNM – Melissa noted that the reintroduction proposal has not been sent to the committee for review yet, but that she would send that out soon. She referenced a placeholder SOW (Project 175), which included broodstock collection activities. Katie Creighton said UDWR was not planning to do this work in fall 2021. She added that we would need to work through the details of broodstock collection and how that might fit into monitoring trips. Kevin McAbee pointed out that in the draft Desolation Canyon humpback chub population estimate report UDWR makes some recommendations for long term monitoring that could have relevance to this discussion. >Melissa committed to convening a group to discuss humpback chub broodstock collections.

7. Bonytail topics

- a. Dave described his bonytail paper that discussed the low returns on stocked fish. In 2015, the stocking plan was revised (RISP), but increased numbers of stocked

fish have still not produced higher rates of bonytail encountered in the wild. The RISP also listed methods that might increase post-stocking survival, but those were not presented as formal recommendations. However, several BC members that were involved in the RISP effort indicated their intent was that those recommendations be considered formal. A couple of informal studies have developed preliminary estimates for long-term survival since the 2015 RISP, but there is not evidence to indicate significantly higher survival rates. Dave mentioned that the report also includes propagation techniques from lower basin facilities and the San Juan program, as well as information related to the use of floodplain wetlands for bonytail based on some recent data. Wetlands have been used to some extent in the lower basin. Dave reviewed the report proposal: 1) inventory production techniques and see what other aspects we can incorporate 2) evaluate more successful stocking events to identify potential techniques that contributed to survival 3) look at off channel wetlands for stocking and potentially for natural reproduction. Dave is looking to continue conversations with the PDO and hatcheries to work towards these recommendations. Dave hoped to keep these adjustments budget neutral and potentially reduce stocking targets to focus on implementing these additional techniques. Pete agreed with Dave's assessment that there are still components of the RISP we could be instituting, especially stocking locations, flow and predator training. Tildon said we should clearly identify the data that needs to be included with stocking events to track success. Travis asked when the program recommended stocking bonytail in summer. Matt Fry said they began in 2012. Matt Fry described that data for specific stockings are stored in STReAMS and if there are additional data that we want to track, the hatcheries may already be recording that data. Travis mentioned that antennas are our primary means of detecting bonytail, and Dale added that maybe our sampling protocols are not designed to specifically detect bonytail. Dave asked if it might be appropriate to revise the stocking plan again to incorporate some of the changes listed in his report.

- b. Review of stocking locations – Dave summarized a call with hatchery managers held on March 10 to discuss bonytail stocking locations this spring. The hatcheries were willing to adjust stocking times where possible to better align with warmer temperatures in spring. Dave reviewed specific locations for each hatchery. See Appendix.
8. Colorado pikeminnow propagation – The PDO put in a request for Ouray NFH-Randlett to receive 10,000 Colorado pikeminnow fry from Southwestern Native Aquatic Resources & Recovery Center in June. In order to prepare for future pikeminnow propagation, the hatchery would like some experience with the species. There are not plans to release the fish into upper basin rivers, and we will look into alternative dispositions. These fish are simply for the purpose of gaining experience in culture techniques specific to pikeminnow.
9. RIPRAP and Program Guidance – Tom Chart reminded the group that Julie emailed Program Guidance documents on March 1. The Guidance is more specific than in the

past in order to keep within available funding levels. SOWs are due April 28, with the exception of Program Management SOWs which are due in June. The email provides a shorthand summary of specific revisions to approximately 20 SOWs related to suggested budget cuts. The PDO also sent out the RIPRAP materials on March 10. We are asking technical committee members to work with MC representatives to submit one set of comments on those documents via email by May 14th, similar to the process from 2020.

10. Schedule next meetings – Tom Chart suggested the next BC meeting occur in early May, prior to the RIPRAP comment deadline, and to provide an update on floodplain management, etc. The meeting was scheduled for the morning of May 6. Tom also asked the committee about their comfort level holding an in-person meeting in mid-July. Dale and Dave mentioned they would need a change in agency guidelines before committing. Tom proposed the committee hold July 14-15 for a meeting in Grand Junction, CO.
11. Consent agenda – the committee approved the January meeting summaries (*no comments were received*).

ADJOURNED 11:50 a.m.

APPENDIX. 2021 Spring Bonytail Stocking Locations

Wahweap: Stocking currently planned to take place during April 20-26 and will consist of three lots of ca. 3,300 fish each for the following locations: a) San Rafael River (1,000 above Cottonwood Wash habitat feature, remainder below it); b) Dolores River at Rio Mesa Center, UT; and c) Green River at Green River State Park, UT.

Mumma will stock the Yampa River (Mantle Ranch or Deerlodge) with ~ 2,750 BYT the week of July 19th and the Colorado River with ~ 2,500 BYT the week of August 16.

Randlett unit of ONFH: Matt Fry agreed to hold some fish for introduction into Old Charley wetland following filling from the 2021 Green River peak flow. Other locations for stocking in 2021 include the lower White River (near Enron boat ramp) and the Green River (in flooded tributary mouths or wetland breaches; Cliff Creek, Stewart Outflow, Johnson outflow).

Grand Valley unit of ONFH: Dale Ryden and Brian Scheer indicated that bonytail stocking will take place from the third week of June through the third week of July. Fish of the required size should total near 10,000 and will be split up and stocked in three general locations: a) Colorado River near Rifle b) Gunnison River and c) Colorado River in the Grand Valley at various access points.