

# UPPER COLORADO RIVER ENDANGERED FISH RECOVERY PROGRAM

FY 2022 ANNUAL REPORT

PROJECT: 29a

## **Project Title**

Propagation Facilities in the Grand Valley (Ouray National Fish Hatchery - Grand Valley Unit) for Captive Rearing of Endangered Fishes for the Upper Colorado River Basin.

## **Bureau of Reclamation Agreement Number:**

R20PG00024

## **Project/Grant Period:**

Start date: 10/01/2021

End date: 09/30/2024

Reporting period end date: 09/30/2022

Is this the final report? Yes  No

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## **Abstract:**

Ouray National Fish Hatchery - Grand Valley Unit (Ouray NFH-GVU) consists of several facilities near Grand Junction, CO. These facilities include the Horsethief Canyon Native Fish Facility (HCNFF), the 24 Road Hatchery building, and three other “lease-free” grow-out ponds (CDOT Pond, Beswick’s Pond, and Butch Craig Pond).

Ouray NFH-GVU produces and rears razorback sucker for stocking into the Colorado and Gunnison rivers. In addition, Ouray NFH-GVU rears bonytail obtained as larvae from the USFWS’s Southwest Native Aquatic Resources and Recovery Center (SNARRC) in Dexter, NM, for stocking into the Colorado River. All stockings of these two endangered fishes are in accordance with the approved Integrated Stocking Plan (ISP; Integrated Stocking Plan Revision Committee 2015, <https://coloradoriverrecovery.org/uc/science/technical-reports/propagation-stocking/>).

## **Study Schedule:**

1996-Ongoing

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### **Relationship to RIPRAP:**

General Recovery Program Support Action Plan: 2022 RIPRAP

IV. Manage genetic integrity and augment or restore populations (stocking endangered fishes)

IV.A. Genetics Management

IV.A.2. Develop and implement Genetics Management Plan for all species and update as Needed. Czapla 1999

IV.A.4. Secure and manage the following species in hatcheries (according to the Genetics Management Plan)

IV.A.4.a. Razorback sucker

IV.A.4.a.(2) Upper Colorado River

IV.A.4.b. Bonytail

IV.B. Conduct annual fish propagation activities

IV.B.2. Implement revised integrated stocking plan (Integrated Stocking Plan Revision Committee 2015); supersedes all earlier stocking plans, including species-specific and individual basin plans.

IV.C. Operate and maintain facilities

IV.C.2. Ouray NFH: Grand Valley Unit

### **Accomplishment of FY 2022 Tasks and Deliverables, Discussion of Initial Findings and Shortcomings:**

#### Facility Inspections

Ouray NFH-GVU routinely participates in annual inspections to ensure our facilities, as well as the fish we grow, are free from problematic diseases and Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS). On 6 April 2022, personnel from USFWS's Bozeman Fish Health Center (Bozeman FHC) travelled to Ouray NFH-GVU and collected samples for bacteriology and virology. The results were negative for any problematic/reportable fish health diseases.

The annual Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) inspection (normally conducted by personnel from Hotchkiss NFH) was cancelled due to COVID restrictions. Instead, on 10 August 2022, Ouray NFH-GVU personnel gathered the appropriate water and plankton samples and sent them to the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in Helena, MT to be tested for the presence or absence of zebra and/or quagga mussel veligers. A walk-through, hands-on, visual inspection of both our hatchery building and ponds was also conducted by Ouray NFH-GVU personnel. The results of the walk-through inspection were negative for any problematic or reportable AIS (i.e., zebra mussels, quagga mussels, or Asian clams). The water and plankton samples were processed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and on 11 August 2022, our facility was declared negative for the presence of mussel veligers.

Health Condition Profile (HCP) necropsies were performed for both bonytail and razorback sucker (20 fish per species) on 23 July (for bonytail) and 28 September (for razorback sucker) 2022 by Ouray NFH-GVU staff. All metrics were within normally observed ranges. Results were submitted online to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resource's AuSum Program.

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### Education and Public Outreach Activities

Though the activity is unfunded, Ouray NFH-GVU staff annually provide a wide variety of public education and outreach opportunities. These activities are geared toward informing the general public about endangered fish recovery issues and trying to build an advocacy base for endangered fish recovery among the local population. Outreach efforts reach several thousand people each year, ranging from elementary school through college age students, families, Cub Scout troops, professional NGO (e.g., Nature Conservancy), government agency personnel, etc. They include providing tours of the 24 Road Hatchery building, partnering with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) to provide endangered razorback sucker for their Aquarium in the Classroom Program (which allows local elementary school students to raise endangered fish in their classroom, then tag and stock them into the river at the end of the school year), attending local water festivals, providing fish for outreach events, such as Outdoor Heritage Day, Palisade Peach Festival, Home and Garden shows, Farmer's Markets, etc. Ouray NFH-GVU staff also participate in outreach via local newspaper, television, and radio interviews. In addition, our staff annually either performs endangered fish related lectures at or provides panel members for symposiums at Colorado Mesa University.

These education and outreach activities remained curtailed for the first half of FY 2022, due to COVID. However, Ouray NFH-GVU staff were still able to work on several outreach activities in FY 2022, including: providing razorback sucker for the Palisade Heritage Days exhibit in Palisade, CO (30 April 2022), presenting and providing razorback sucker and bonytail for the Western Colorado Children's Water Festival (sponsored by Ute Water) in Grand Junction, CO (19-20 May 2022), and the Yampa Youth Water Festival in Hayden, CO (21 September 2022), as well as providing fish for a permanent endangered fish exhibit at Eureka McConnel Science Center at Colorado Mesa University. Additionally, hatchery staff presented at the Colorado Mesa University Water Course (5 October 2022) as well as performing a total of 11 tours of the 24 Road Hatchery and local fish passage facilities for various Grand Valley schools.

During FY 2022, Ouray NFH-GVU staff continued to partner with and support the Palisade High School (PHS) Fish Hatchery. The 2022-2023 school year is the third year in operation for the student led on-campus fish hatchery. From October 2021 through May 2022, PHS staff and students reared their second batch of 222 razorback sucker that had been transferred from Ouray NFH-GVU to the PHS Fish Hatchery on 29 August 2021. Ouray NFH-GVU staff helped give PHS staff and students aquaculture lessons in hatchery O&M, water quality, fish handling, feeding, sample counting, and PIT-tagging, applying for and administering Investigational New Animal Drug (INAD) treatments (to use non-MS-222 based fish tranquilizers), performing fish health inspections, harvesting, transporting, tempering, and stocking fish into the wild. In May 2022, 222 razorback sucker (mean TL = 220 mm; mean WT = 125 g) were stocked into the Colorado River near Palisade High School, while a crowd of approximately 150 attendees looked on. The stocking generated numerous television reports, and newspaper and internet blog articles. On 29 August 2022, a new batch of 250 juvenile razorback sucker were delivered to the Palisade High School Fish Hatchery for the 2022-2023 school year.

By the end of the 2022-2023 school year, PHS students will have cultured nearly 800 endangered razorback sucker and released them into the Colorado River near their school. Since the partnership began in 2015, seven "year classes" of students who have participated in the planning of and/or culturing of fish at the PHS Fish Hatchery have graduated. A number of these students are currently pursuing

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college degrees and careers in conservation around the country. The partnership has reinforced a new level of trust between the local Grand Valley community and USFWS and has instilled a feeling of ownership from local businesses and residents with regards to fish recovery efforts in the Colorado River. This on-campus partnership concept has recently expanded to include Uintah High School in Vernal, Utah (in partnership with Ouray NFH-Randlett and the Upper Colorado Endangered Fish Recovery Program) where students will culture razorback sucker to be released into the Green River.

### Hatchery Maintenance Activities

In FY 2022 several maintenance and repair projects were completed, and several are still ongoing at the Ouray NFH-GVU, including:

1. After a power brown-out in fall 2021 (from a power delivery line located across the river from our facility), one of the two pumps in the underground infiltration gallery had ceased to function. After consulting with McAtlin Electric it was determined that the pump motor had failed and needed replaced. The two pumps in the underground infiltration gallery have been in place and running 24/7/365 for 10 years. The pump and motor assembly are one “married” unit, therefore replacing just the motor was not an option. It was determined that the best option would be to purchase two new pump/motor assemblies and replace both. In cooperation with the USFWS, USBR and GVWU personnel, both pump/motor assemblies were successfully replaced in May of FY 2022.
2. Automatic fish feeders were installed on the HCNFF ponds, to distribute feed (temporally and longitudinally) more reliably across the ponds.
3. Staff performed several repairs of broken water lines and air distribution lines at the HCNFF ponds.
4. The water valve operators that were originally installed on the HCNFF ponds were not the proper model (i.e., they were not engineered to be buried and then exposed to ground water moisture). As a result, we have been replacing these valve operators with a different model (that can be buried and then exposed to ground moisture) as they have been breaking, which is happening with increasing frequency each year (this year USFWS personnel replaced four). However, each time a water valve operator ceases to function, it costs a delay of days to weeks to dig it up and repair it, plus the cost associated with the part, backhoe, labor etc.
5. Since 2013, there has been a considerable build-up of iron in the pipes leading from the underground infiltration gallery to the HCNFF grow-out ponds. This has restricted the ability to deliver water to the HCNFF ponds. Currently USFWS personnel is working with USBR to have these lines jetted as USBR has their own jetting equipment.

Projects that require immediate attention at Ouray NFH-GVU include:

1. There has been some subsidence under the north side floor of the 24 Road hatchery building (i.e., Hatchery # 2). The Ouray NFH-GVU personnel are in the process of getting a second bid to have the voided space under the floor filled and supported with an expanding foam before the

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concrete floor buckles and breaks. This project is currently going out to bid, with repairs anticipated to be completed in FY 2023.

2. Purchase/install two new HVAC/dehumidifier systems, including replacing all ducting, for both sides of the 24 Road Hatchery building. The old HVAC/dehumidifier systems are near their end-of-life expectancy and the old R-22 coolant they run on can no longer be purchased. All water temperatures in the hatchery building are controlled by ambient air temperatures, which are controlled by these two AC/dehumidifier units. Inside water temperatures greatly affect all aspects of fish health, and growth during their time in the hatchery building.

### Razorback Sucker

In March 2022, approximately 10,020 age-1 razorback sucker were being held indoors at the 24 Road Hatchery building. These fish represented young from 14 different paired matings of brood stock performed in April 2021. From early April to mid-May 2022 approximately 6,680 of these age-1 razorback sucker were stocked into the grow-out ponds at HCNFF. Ponds were stocked with a mixture of fish from 14 different family lots. Equal numbers from each represented family lot were stocked into a total of eight ponds. These fish were all PIT tagged in the 24 Road Hatchery building several weeks prior to being stocked into grow-out ponds. The remaining age-1 razorback sucker (approximately 3,340 fish) continued to be held at the 24 Road Hatchery building until bonytail were harvested from four ponds at HCNFF (in mid-July 2022). Those four ponds were then available to be stocked with the razorback sucker remaining at 24 Road Hatchery.

Spawning, rearing, tagging, harvest, and stocking procedures used for razorback sucker in FY-2022 followed standard protocols used in previous years for this project. No significant deviations from these protocols/processes occurred in FY-2022. While razorback sucker are in the hatchery, they are reared in circular tanks where a constant current exists. As water enters the circular tank from above, on the outside perimeter of the tank, it circulates around the tank, and exits via vertical slots in a standpipe, in the bottom center of the tank. This has always been standard protocol and is necessary to help circulate/oxygenate the water, distribute food throughout the tank, and flush/eliminate waste products. Over the years, it has been argued within the Biology Committee, whether this constant water flow within circular tanks constitutes flow training or not. However, no specific “flow training” experiments were done outside of this normal operating procedure. When razorback sucker are in the larger grow-out ponds, a small amount of current still exists, due to wind, water flowing into and out of the pond, etc., but the current in grow-out ponds is less than what these fish experience in hatchery tanks. For razorback sucker, there were no feed changes, predator exposure experiments, etc. in FY-2022.

Despite continuing difficulties presented by COVID, in April 2022, Ouray NFH-GVU staff were once again able to successfully spawn razorback sucker broodstock held at HCNFF. The eggs produced from this spawning effort were transferred to the 24 Road Hatchery building. In 2022, approximately 81% of all razorback sucker eggs successfully hatched into fry. The hatchery is currently holding 10,640 2022 year-class razorback sucker for UCREFRP production purposes.

In FY-2022, we had a 95% average return rate for FY-2021 razorback sucker, for all fish stocked from the hatchery into grow-out ponds versus the number that were harvested and stocked into the river. Any “excess” age-0 razorback sucker (i.e., fish above and beyond numbers required to meet Recovery

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Program annual stocking goals) culled from family lots as fish grew in the hatchery were stocked into our “lease-free” grow-out ponds for later opportunistic harvest and stocking.

Our three “lease-free” grow-out ponds (CDOT, Beswick’s, and Butch Craig ponds) will continue to be used as necessary in future years to provide redundancy and as we continue to evaluate management options to improve the survival and growth of razorback sucker for augmentation.

In October of FY 2022, Ouray NFH-GVU stocked 13,500 excess 2022 young-of-year razorback sucker averaging 40-70 mm TL into CDOT pond.

### Bonytail

In spring 2021 approximately 15,000 larval bonytail were received from SNARRC. These fish were stocked into one, ½-acre grow-out pond at HCNFF. In October 2021 these bonytail were harvested from HCNFF and brought into the 24 Road Hatchery to overwinter. In early to mid-April 2022 these bonytail were transferred to HCNFF to maximize growth until being stocked in summer 2022. These fish were all PIT tagged in the 24 Road Hatchery building, several months prior to being stocked into the grow-out ponds.

In spring 2022 approximately 15,000 larval bonytail were received from SNARRC. These fish were stocked into one, ½-acre pond at HCNFF. In October 2022 11,900 bonytail were harvested from HCNFF and brought into the 24 Road Hatchery to be grown overwinter. In spring 2023 the 11,900 bonytail in the 24 Road Hatchery will be stocked back into grow-out ponds at HCNFF, where they will be reared until being stocked in summer 2023 at various locations in the Colorado River.

Rearing, tagging, harvest, and stocking procedures used for bonytail in FY-2022 followed standard protocols used in previous years for this project. No significant deviations from these protocols/processes occurred in FY-2022. While bonytail are in the hatchery, they are reared in circular tanks where a constant current exists. As water enters the circular tank from above, on the outside perimeter of the tank, it circulates around the tank. and exits via vertical slots in a standpipe, in the bottom center of the tank. This has always been standard protocol and is necessary to help circulate/oxygenate the water, distribute food throughout the tank, and flush/eliminate waste products. Over the years, it has been argued within the Biology Committee, whether this constant water flow within circular tanks constitutes flow training or not. However, no specific “flow training” experiments were done outside of this normal operating procedure. When bonytail are in the larger grow-out ponds, a small amount of current still exists, due to wind, water flowing into and out of the pond, etc., but the current in grow-out ponds is less than what these fish experience in hatchery tanks. For bonytail, there were no feed changes, predator exposure experiments, etc. in FY-2022.

We typically observe < 10% loss of larval bonytail to stockable age-1 fish, with the greatest losses typically occurring immediately after larval fish are received via FedEx from SNARRC and after stocking into grow-out ponds due to avian predation. Any “excess” bonytail culled from family lots as fish grew were stocked into our “lease-free” grow-out ponds for later opportunistic harvest and stocking.

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### 2022 Stocking Summary

*Razorback sucker:* A total of 7,092 razorback sucker (118.2% of the target stocking number {n = 6,000}) were stocked into the Colorado, Gunnison, and Yampa rivers in 2022 (Table 1). Of these, 6,458 were from the HCNFF grow-out ponds. The other 633 were from the 24 Road Hatchery building and gravel pit ponds. Of the fish from the 24 Road Hatchery, 221 were provided to the Palisade High School Fish Hatchery for use in their facility. Those 221 fish were stocked into the river by PHS staff and students at the Riverbend Park boat launch in May 2022. This stocking happened before the excessively low instream flows experienced in the 15 Mile reach throughout much of the 2022 water year. The other 413 fish were harvested from gravel pit ponds and stocked into the Colorado River downstream of the 15 Mile Reach. All other razorback sucker stocked in 2022 into the Colorado or Gunnison rivers were stocked either far upstream of Grand Junction, CO (i.e., in Rifle, CO) or downstream of the 15 Mile Reach. Excessively low in-river flows in the 15 Mile Reach throughout the latter portion of the 2022 water year (i.e., after June) made stocking razorback sucker in the 15 Mile Reach in 2022 unsuitable. Likewise, the few off-channel, wetland type habitats that are located in the Grand Valley outside of the 15 Mile Reach were unavailable for stocking, due to low water levels in the mainstem river. After transport to the river and an appropriate tempering/water exchange period (minimum of 1-2 hours, to acclimate fish to riverine water chemistry and temperatures), all razorback sucker were stocked into low velocity main channel habitats, during daylight hours. Stocking locations were the same as those used for razorback sucker the last several years. There nine razorback suckers of the 6,458 HCNFF ponds stocked into the Yampa River after the Upper Yampa Water Festival. The mean TL for the 6,458 razorback sucker stocked from HCNFF in 2022 was 399 mm. The mean TL for the 221 razorback sucker stocked from Palisade High School Fish hatchery in 2022 was 216 mm. The mean TL for the 413 gravel pit pond fish was 353 mm. Numbers of fish stocked in each location in 2022 can be found in Table 1.

*Bonytail:* A total of 10,101 bonytail (101.01% of the target stocking number {n = 10,000}) were stocked into the Colorado and Yampa rivers in 2022. Most were from the HCNFF grow-out ponds with a small number coming from CDOT/Beswick ponds or the 24 Road hatchery building (Table 2). The mean TL for all bonytail stocked in 2022 was 243 mm, which was slightly smaller than the target stocking size identified in the ISP ( $\geq 250$  mm TL). The UCREFRP's Biology Committee had been informed that the overall average size of the bonytail being stocked by our facility in 2022 might be reduced in comparison to the "normal" production goals, identified in the ISP. In Fall 2021 (i.e., the beginning of FY 2022) prior to bringing bonytail into the 24 Road Hatchery, the bonytail were graded at HCNFF which resulted in two different size groups of fish ("Tops" and "Bottoms"). The goal of grading was to eliminate feeding competition in the rearing tanks at the 24 Road Hatchery and to produce more consistent size (i.e., Total Length) groups for stocking into the grow-out ponds at HCNFF in spring of 2022. The reduced size is, at least in part, due to stocking out all 10,099 bonytail to avoid selection of female over male fish. More than likely, if we were to stock out only the "Tops" from the first grade our average TL would meet or exceed the 250 mm TL identified in the ISP. However, the total number stocked would be below the target stocking number of 10,000 and more than likely, the majority of the stocked fish would be female. Numbers of fish stocked in each location in FY 2022 can be found in Table 2.

Like most razorback sucker, bonytail were stocked after precipitous in-river drops in flow that occurred in 2022. Thus, stockings were made in areas that would avoid the 15 Mile Reach in 2022, which had

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become unsuitable for stocking fish by July 2022. Likewise, the few off-channel, wetland type habitats that are located in the Grand Valley outside of the 15 Mile Reach were unavailable for stocking, due to low water levels in the mainstem river. After transport to the river and an appropriate tempering/water exchange period (minimum of 1-2 hours, to acclimate fish to riverine water chemistry and temperatures), all bonytail were stocked into low velocity main channel habitats, during daylight hours. Stocking locations were the same as those used for razorback sucker the last several years.

Due to inclement weather conditions (e.g., thunder/lightning storms during harvest and stocking efforts) in July 2022, daytime/evening stockings of bonytail were performed at only one stocking site (RM 157.1) to see if any post-stocking survival difference could be detected between fish being stocked at different times of the day.

### **Additional noteworthy observations:**

None

### **Recommendations**

1. Continue management and operation of Ouray NFH – GUV facilities to serve as a primary refuge facility for razorback sucker and bonytail.
2. Continue production, grow-out, and stocking of razorback sucker and bonytail (and other native, endangered fish species as appropriate) to meet stocking goals set forth in approved stocking plans by the UCREFRP.
3. Continue to work with the UCREFRP to determine if more ponds need to be constructed (or current ponds re-purposed) at HCNFF to prepare to take Colorado pikeminnow on station in upcoming years.
4. Pursue highest-priority construction items for the 24 Road hatchery building, including:
  - a. Repair subsidence under the floor in northern portion of the 24 Road Hatchery building
  - b. Replace the two aging/outdated HVAC/dehumidifier systems on the two separate sides of the 24 Road Fish hatchery.
5. Prioritize and address other maintenance-related issues (e.g., valves, pipe jetting) in FY 2023. Some of these maintenance-related activities may require financial and/or engineering assistance from the UCREFRP and/or BOR to accomplish.

### **Project Status:**

Project is on track and ongoing.

### **FY2022 Budget Status**

Funds Provided: \$567,658

Funds Expended: \$567,658

Difference: -0-

Percent of the FY 2022 work completed, and projected costs to complete: 100%

Recovery Program funds spent for publication charges: -0-

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### **Status of Data Submission**

All PIT tag data was submitted to the UCREFRP database manager and STReAMS database system in October 2022 for Project 29a

### **Signed:**

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Principal and Additional Investigators

12/15/2022

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Table 1. Locations, dates, and numbers of razorback suckers stocked into the Upper Colorado River Basin by Ouray National Fish Hatchery – Grand Valley Unit in 2022. CO = Colorado River, GU = Gunnison River, YA = Yampa River.

River	Stocking Location	River Mile	Number Stocked	TL Range (in mm)	Date	Source
CO	Colorado River State Park: Fruita, CO	157.1	77	457-621	20 Apr	Old broodstock from HCNFF
CO	Riverbend Park: Palisade, CO	183.6	221	108-304	4 May	Palisade H.S. Fish
CO	Rifle Boat Ramp: Rifle, CO	240.7	1,621	292-431	6 & 14 Sep	HCNFF Fish
CO	Redlands Parkway Boat Ramp: Grand Jct., CO	166.7	1,615	310-477	7 & 13 Sep	HCNFF Fish
CO	Colorado River State Park: Fruita, CO	157.1	1,564	341-428	15 & 19 Sep	HCNFF Fish
GU	Confluence Park: Delta, CO	57.1	1,572	326-425	20 & 21 Sep	HCNFF Fish
CO	CO River adjacent to Beswick Pond: Grand Jct., CO	174.9	394	200-524	4 Mar - 26 Sep	Beswick Pond
CO	CO River adjacent to CDOT Pond: Grand Jct., CO	205.6	19	383-527	15 Aug - 26 Sep	CDOT Pond
YA	Yampa River State Park: Hayden, CO	165.2	9	358-425	21 Sep	HCNFF Fish

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Table 2. Locations, dates, and numbers of bonytail stocked into the Upper Colorado River Basin by Ouray National Fish Hatchery – Grand Valley Unit in 2022. CO = Colorado River.

River	Stocking Location	River Mile	Number Stocked	TL Range (in mm)	Date	Source & Stocking Period
CO	CO River adjacent to Beswick Pond: Grand Jct., CO	174.9	14	218-276	21 Mar - 24 Aug	Beswick Pond Daytime Stocking
CO	Colorado River State Park: Fruita, CO	157.1	1,131	135-293	5 Jul	HCNFF Fish Daytime Stocking
CO	Rifle Boat Ramp: Rifle, CO	240.7	1,972	140-331	6 Jul	HCNFF Fish Daytime Stocking
CO	Redlands Parkway Boat Ramp: Grand Jct., CO	166.7	1,987	175-385	8 Jul	HCNFF Fish Daytime Stocking
CO	Colorado River State Park: Fruita, CO	157.1	1,327	150-296	11 Jul	HCNFF Fish Evening Stocking
CO	Rifle Boat Ramp: Rifle, CO	240.7	1,241	148-362	12 Jul	HCNFF Fish Daytime Stocking
CO	Redlands Parkway Boat Ramp: Grand Jct., CO	166.7	1,230	152-297	13 Jul	HCNFF Fish Daytime Stocking
CO	Colorado River State Park: Fruita, CO	157.1	1,197	144-368	14 Jul	HCNFF Fish Daytime Stocking
YA	Yampa River State Park: Hayden, CO	165.2	2	330-360	21 Sept	24 Road Fish Hatchery