



# Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program

Dated: September 3, 2019

## Management Committee Webinar Summary, June 25, 1 pm - 4 pm MT

### In Attendance:

Steve Wolff, chair  
Jojo La  
Tom Pitts  
Patrick McCarthy  
Leslie James  
Shane Capron  
Melissa Trammell  
Ryan Christianson  
Marj Nelson  
Paul Badame  
Tom Chart (non-voting)

State of Wyoming  
State of Colorado  
Water Users  
The Nature Conservancy  
Colorado River Energy Distributors Assoc.  
Western Area Power Administration  
National Park Service  
Bureau of Reclamation  
Fish and Wildlife Service  
Representing Todd Adams/Chris Keleher - State of Utah  
Program Director

### Interested Parties:

Chris Treese  
Zane Kessler  
Lee Traynham  
Harry Crockett  
Kevin McAbee  
Julie Stahl  
Don Anderson  
Tildon Jones  
Dave Speas

Colorado River Water Conservation District  
Colorado River Water Conservation District  
US Bureau of Reclamation  
Colorado Parks and Wildlife  
Acting Program Deputy Director  
Database Manager, Program Office  
Instream Flow Coordinator, Program Office  
Habitat Coordinator, Program Office  
Bureau of Reclamation

Comments submitted by: Tom Pitts

### CONVENED: 1:00 PM MT

1. Introductions & requests to modify agenda - agenda was modified to read as follows.
2. Hydrology Update - Don Anderson said there is a lot to celebrate in the 2019 winter-spring snowpack. All river basins from Flaming Gorge down through the Lake Powell inflow are projected at greater than 100% of normal snowpack. The Gunnison and the Duchesne have especially high projections. Don does not anticipate needing to lease additional water out of Elkhead and flows are sufficient on the Colorado River to get through the irrigation season. Yampa River flows tracked pretty close to normal through April, when flows moved up above normal. As of June 17th, a third of the snowpack in the basin remains as snow to melt off through the summer. Drought conditions are not projected anywhere in the Colorado

River basin this year. As a reminder, last year, the four-corners region was under extreme drought conditions.

In the Green River, flows at Jensen were sustained at >19,000 cfs for 10 days, thanks to the diligent efforts of Program partners. The goal for wet years is 18,600 cfs. In the mainstem Colorado River, CROS was implemented for the fourth year in the last five years. Don thanked Michelle Garrison for her coordination effort this spring, during which conditions changed frequently. Instead of seeking higher flows, the goal for this year's CROS was to extend the peak (which peaked at over 22,000 cfs and sustained >18,000 cfs for ~9 days). The sustained flows assisted endangered fish and prevented flooding that may have occurred with higher peaks. Don noted that there has been a substantial increase in the number of razorback sucker moving up through the Roller Dam fish passage over the last few years, so he will pay careful attention to their movement this year. In the Gunnison, the Aspinall released water to achieve the highest peak since 1995, at over 17,000 cfs. The peak was sustained >14,000 cfs for ~7 days. Models suggest above average precipitation and above average temperatures for July, August and September.

3. GREAT Update - Tom Chart said the Green River Evaluation and Assessment Team (GREAT) Report is reevaluating information originally provided in the Muth *et al.* 2000 flow recommendations, using data collected since those flow recommendations started. Kirk LaGory and Kevin Bestgen led the team in developing the draft report. Kirk has since retired, but is still working with the Program to revise the report, which was sent to the technical committees on May 21st. Technical committee comments are due by July 22nd, after a longer than normal review period because of the extensive nature of the report. After those comments are addressed, the Management Committee will review and approve the report. The Program Office held two webinars to assist with partners' review and provide the opportunity to ask questions of the authors. Two peer reviewers have agreed to review the report, Bob Muth (retired-USFWS) and Charles Yackulic (Grand Canyon Research Center). We have received comments from Charles Yackulic and those have been distributed to the technical committees. The authors have agreed to revise the document as soon as possible. It is likely that the report will be distributed to the Management Committee this fall. Tom Pitts asked what changes are recommended as part of the GREAT report and whether that fits within the current ROD for Flaming Gorge. Tom Chart said the revised report first recommends changes to the timing of peak flows and duration of peaks, as per the Larval Trigger Study Plan (LTSP). The second change looked at the range of baseflows recommended in Muth *et al.* 2000 for the summer period. Bestgen and Hill recommend a revision, which increases flow levels under dry and moderately dry conditions. The GREAT recommends experimentation with these revised base flows in conjunction with modified timing. In the spring, the goal is to match peaks with larval razorback sucker presence in the river. In the summer, the recommendations are intended to support backwater habitat when Colorado pikeminnow age-0 fish are present and emerging from the Yampa. In addition, the report recommends experimentation with the flow-spikes to disadvantage smallmouth bass in between the peak and base flow periods. Flow-spikes are designed to move adult smallmouth bass off nests and make larvae more vulnerable to predation. A study plan is currently in place for LTSP. A study plan has been approved by the BC for flow-spike experimentation. A study plan is needed for the base flow component. There is the potential for effects on habitat and channel morphology from these baseflows, and the Program is working with the

National Park Service to develop a study plan to monitor these features and to provide information for future evaluation. As Tom Chart understands, verified by Ryan Christianson, these three efforts can continue in an experimental mode, but discussions will continue at the MC level when the report comes before the Committee in the fall. Shane reiterated that questions about NEPA and implementation remain. Tom Chart recommended coordination in the near future between WAPA, the MC Chair, the PDO, and Reclamation to frame up that MC discussion.

4. LTSP Implementation - Tildon Jones summarized the successful implementation of LTSP flows this spring. Tildon said that the dry year of 2018 evaporated water out of all the floodplains by October of last year, so all wetlands were reset from nonnative fish presence. None of the floodplains connected before larval razorback were detected in the river. The Program was able to time flows from Flaming Gorge to correspond with Yampa peak flows to push water into Stewart Lake, Johnson Bottom, Sheppard Bottom, Leota, Old Charley, Stirrup and Above Brennan. Field crews have confirmed razorback larvae in all but Leota and Sheppard, but are still looking in those two wetlands. Although LTSP flows do not specifically occur on the Colorado, larval razorback sucker were also entrained into Matheson wetland. Although the project is not fully built, they were able to screen incoming flows when razorback sucker larvae were detected in the canal to allow larval entrainment while excluding larger nonnative fish. Water is being held in the wetland with stop-logs pending further construction.
5. Workplan Update - Tom Chart said we are on a two-year work planning cycle. On April 29th, draft FY 20-21 Scopes of Work (SOW) were due. Julie summarized that ~95% of all expected SOWs have been received, reviewed by the Program Coordinators and posted on the Program website. The Biology, Water Acquisition and I&E Committees will hold meetings in July to evaluate the SOWs under their purview. New this year are Reclamation budget templates that will accompany all scopes. Dave Speas and Kevin McAbee led a webinar on how to use that tool that was attended by most PIs. We will bring a draft workplan and SOWs to the Management Committee meeting on September 3-4.
6. Post-2023
  - a. Julie Stahl gave an overview of the tool sent out to Program partners. The Program Office addressed comments we received on the tables as best we could. One comment was related to the ramifications of the tables in the future, particularly whether selecting options created a commitment to specific activities. Julie drew attention to the disclaimers in the tables to clarify that selections in the table are really for discussion purposes only and do not commit the Program or any individual partner to action. Reviewers can add comments to clarify their responses in the comment boxes provided for each line (orange outline, blue text). There will be webinars on June 26 and July 15 to go through the tool and answer questions on how to use it. Leslie James asked if the tool automatically submits--Julie said it does not. The tool does allow you to submit multiple options (e.g. an ideal program, one designed to hit a budget target, etc.). You must email the Excel file back to Julie to officially submit it. Tom Chart reiterated the importance of each stakeholder completing this exercise to adequately capture input for the creation of a new Program to put in place for 2024. All Program Office staff should be available to

answer questions about the content of these tables in the scheduled webinars. You may also contact coordinators as needed as you make your choices.

Leslie mentioned difficult questions this exercise has generated. Tom Chart addressed some of these issues and the possibility that questions about what a post-recovery world will look like may linger into a new Program structure. Tom Pitts commented that if we recover these species, there are still activities that would need to continue to maintain their status. Tom Pitts also reiterated the Program goal should be to commit to the recovery of these fishes. Tom Pitts brought up the need to negotiate funding agreements between the partners. Leslie asked if we should assume recovery by 2023. Tom Pitts said he thought we should not make that assumption, in his opinion. Several committee members asked about Recovery Goals and what those might look like in the near and long term. Tom Chart said it may be helpful to look at the 5-year reviews for razorback sucker and humpback chub to get a better idea of how the Service is looking at these concepts. Tildon said that in exploring the Colorado pikeminnow SSA, the PVA shows the effect of actions in the basin, but the models do not show how great the effect of any action will be with certainty. Each species needs reproduction, recruitment, and survival, and that Program activities should improve one or more of the three, but there is uncertainty around the magnitude of effects around each activity. Tom Pitts said recovery goals likely will not be updated prior the draft post-2023 report being submitted to the Secretary of the Interior. Shane clarified that he wants to know the Service's perspective around the current goals, not necessarily have a discussion about it. Marj said FWS can think about how to present some parameters to provide a "blurry vision", particularly for humpback chub and razorback sucker before August 1st. Shane noted that the differences between short-term and long-term time frames are important. Shane and Leslie discussed the complications involved with different species with different statuses and the timelines that might be required to achieve desired ends. Tom Chart and Marj explained that they believe FWS has clarified the view of "threatened" versus "endangered" with recent SSAs and 5-year reviews, and that process and decision-making might provide more insight.

Melissa Trammell noted that sometimes the activity levels often don't differ much in costs, but higher confidence options may indicate capital funding might be required to achieve a given outcome. Tom Chart explained that the current tool is designed to primarily generate annual funding levels, and that we would like to generate capital estimates for a given scope of program activities. Tom Pitts said that he had requested Reclamation to provide estimates of new capital funding needs before and after 2023 and had also requested an estimate of the cost of rehabilitating capital facilities as they age. The request was made at a recent San Juan Recovery Program meeting during a discussion of post-2023 needs. Tom Chart also pointed out that "in-kind" partner contributions are not captured in some of these activities and those contributions will need to be clarified.

Julie recognized that the Program Office has struggled with many of these questions and was encouraged the group recognizes these intricacies. She reiterated this process should help us move the conversation forward, provide some direction that the group seems to

be headed in, and possibly refine the decision space for answering these more difficult questions at the September MC meeting. Julie committed to summarizing the data from this exercise in time for these meetings, provided members submit their comments by August 1. Jojo La asked how others might be viewing their selections, for example whether they are deciding based on recovery or a set budget target. Melissa acknowledged that choices might reflect recovery, budget, or agency, but that the choices seemed to capture most possible futures. Tom Chart felt the technical input from workshops did a good job of covering the options. >The PDO will add a discussion of Recovery Goals to the July 15th webinar agenda.

- b. Schedule for fall discussions for Post-2023 - Tom Chart said we will have data around annual program activities and funds, rough capital costs and partner contributions outside of annual funding at the September MC meeting. There will be variation around the estimates, but they should provide a framework of the needs for the Report to Congress. We have identified 4 pieces of additional information that we need to move forward in this process. We recommend reconvening the Post 2023 group made up of CC and MC members to begin to address these four issues:
  - i. As it relates to the cost to the Program, we have not yet dealt with Program Management. We encourage the partners to take a hard look at how the Programs are managed moving forward. Questions could include: Do we have two offices? Is it FWS? Location?
  - ii. What is the funding formula? Who pays for what? Can we continue with the formula in the Blue Book from 1988, with recognition that was then referenced as USBR contributions will likely comprise some blend of appropriations and hydropower revenues.
  - iii. The Report to Congress will clear the path for new or re-authorized funding legislation. Funding legislation will need to reference a forward-looking Cooperative Agreement. What is our strategy to communicate with Cooperative Agreement signatories such that they are fully briefed on the content and intent of our Report to Congress? The Cooperative Agreements could come in the form of an extension of existing agreement or may need to be revised.
  - iv. If we have new agreements, Federal dollars are committed. Is there environmental compliance that needs to be completed to sign the agreements? Is NEPA appropriate?

We propose a 3 day workshop, during which the Post 2023 group divides up into 4 subgroups to work out how these processes move forward and support each other. Those subgroups would report back to the Post-2023 group in the meeting, then back to the MC, the CC and the IC. Jojo asked how the subgroups would be defined. The Program Office will develop more structured guidance around that meeting and distribute it to the MC. Leslie noted that many of these conversations have legal and financial implications. Julie said the intent of having smaller groups was to make the scope of topics more manageable, and then mix those up to include more viewpoints. She acknowledged this is a very preliminary plan. Tom Chart said the Program Office would develop a narrative (including a more detailed Gantt chart) for the MC's consideration and input. Tom Pitts noted the importance of the San Juan Program being involved in these discussions. He believes the first thing we need to do is to lay out the issues ahead of us, the first of which

is what activities and costs look like. Funding discussions should come next, before funding legislation can be developed. As a next step, Tom Pitts asked the Program Office to work with MC members to develop an outline for the Report to Congress to identify all issues that need to be on the table. Leslie recommended asking the Secretary about the level of detail requested in the report. >The Program Office will put some options on the table to move the conversation forward on these larger issues and distribute that to the MC. Don appreciated Leslie's thought that we will need perspectives from others outside of our group. Don also appreciated Jojo's concern about excluding certain parties and noting that everyone has a stake in all of these issues. The PDO will work on the format to try to encourage the best conversations and the most progress.

7. Consent agenda: Approval of meeting summary from April 25-26 meeting. Meeting summary was approved as amended.