

UPPER COLORADO RIVER ENDANGERED FISH RECOVERY PROGRAM

FY 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

PROJECT: 3

Project Title

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Program Management

Bureau of Reclamation Agreement Number:

R18PG40023

Project/Grant Period:

Start date: 10/1/2017

End date: 9/30/2022

Reporting period end date: 9/30/22

Is this the final report? No

Principal Investigator:

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Abstract:

The ongoing work of the Recovery Program Director's Office is to ensure timely and effective planning, implementation, coordination, and administrative support of the Recovery Program by coordinating and implementing recovery activities; conducting planning and evaluation; managing the Recovery Program annual budget; providing staff assistance to [Program committees](#); and directing and coordinating Service Recovery Program activities. These tasks were carried out by Recovery Program staff including the director, deputy director, coordinators for the major recovery elements, and administrative staff. Significant FY21 accomplishments include assisting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to publish a [proposed rule to downlist razorback sucker](#), managing through the continued impacts of COVID 19 on Program priorities; coordinating water releases and flow management to improve habitat conditions for endangered fish; managing the inundation of floodplain wetlands to support wild recruitment of razorback sucker; implementing the [Upper Colorado River Basin nonnative and Invasive Aquatic Species Prevention and Control Strategy with our state partners](#); refining the web-based [Species Tagging, Research and Monitoring System \(STReAMS\)](#) for data management and access; expanding outreach tools to allow for online outreach efforts to persist when public gatherings are cancelled; coordinating conversations around the continuation of the Program after the current funding deadline of September 2023 passes; and managing the Program's annual budget.

Study Schedule:

1989-Ongoing

Relationship to RIPRAP:

General Recovery Program Support Action Plan:

- VII.A.1 Assure consistency of RIPRAP with currently approved recovery plans.
- VII.A.2 Recognize the role of the UCREFRP in revised recovery plans
- VII.A.3 Update, refine, and prioritize recovery actions (RIPRAP) annually.

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- VII.A.5 Update recovery goals/plans.
- VII.A.5e Conduct species status review and update recovery goals at least every 5 years.
- VII.A.7 Monitor and assess Recovery Program accomplishments annually.
- VII.A.8 Develop biennial work plan to address priority needs.
- VII.B Actively participate in Recovery Program committees and secure funding for annual work plan and larger projects.
- VII.C Manage, direct, and coordinate Recovery Program activities.

Accomplishment of FY 2021 Tasks and Deliverables, Discussion of Initial Findings and Shortcomings:

Program Director & Staff

Directed and coordinated implementation of recovery efforts as described in the RIPRAP and the Biennial Work Plan in the areas of: a) instream flow protection; b) habitat restoration; c) nonnative fish management; d) propagation/genetics; e) research, monitoring, and data management; and d) information, education, and public involvement. Program coordinators are: Don Anderson for instream flow protection (the majority of Don's instream flow actions are covered by Project 19) and fish passage/screen maintenance; Kevin McAbee for nonnative fish management and humpback chub monitoring; Tildon Jones for habitat management and research and monitoring; Julie Stahli for database management and assisting with propagation; and Melanie Fischer for information, education, and public involvement. Tom Chart was the Program Director until August when he retired; Kevin McAbee served as Acting Program Director through the end of the reporting period.

Maintained tracking system of Program reports and due dates to ensure timely accomplishment of Program objectives.

Significant Program accomplishments/activities in 2021 included:

Instream Flow & Habitat Management

- Maintained critical flows and operated fish screens and passages in multiple river basins with severe drought impacts.
- Coordinated with a White River Planning Team to support White River management planning efforts which will continue in FY22.
- Continued operation of Flaming Gorge Dam under the Biological Opinion and ROD to implement a flow-spike to limit the reproduction of smallmouth bass under a new study plan approved by the biology committee. Spring flows were not designed to be larvaly-triggered or inundate flood plains because of the predicted severity of drought conditions. Program scientists were concerned about the ability to keep floodplains full of water throughout an extremely hot and dry summer.
- Operated to meet spring flow targets and recommended base flow temperatures in Reach 1 and at the confluence with the Yampa River. Construction work was completed to convert the Stirrup wetland into an additional wetland that can be managed to provide valuable larval nursery habitat. All that remains is installation of the gate, which is expected before runoff in 2022. In December 2019, the PDO presented the Management Committee (MC) with a technical committee-approved draft of the Flaming Gorge Dam Flow and Temperature Recommendations report. In lieu of approving the report, the MC directed the PDO to work with Western Area Power Administration and Reclamation

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to determine the potential effects of the report's recommended flow experiments on hydropower impact analysis (ongoing).

- Operated the Aspinall Unit on the Gunnison River under Aspinall EIS and ROD to achieve the Program's spring and base flow targets for the Gunnison River. Monitoring to evaluate effects of Aspinall operation as per the Aspinall Study Plan is ongoing.

Nonnative Fish Management

- Program partners continued to implement Upper Colorado River Basin Nonnative and Invasive Aquatic Species Prevention and Control Strategy.
- The Program Director's Office continued coordination of in-river nonnative fish removal efforts over 600+ miles of river.
- Program stakeholders continue to work towards fish escapement prevention projects at Ridgway, and Starvation Reservoirs. The Red Fleet Reservoir screen was completed.
- Continued to track the emerging threat of grass carp, through testing ancillary captures of adults to determine if they are fertile or sterile fish. Stocking of fertile grass carp is illegal in both Utah and Colorado, where adults are captured.

Propagation & Data Management

- Continued hatchery production and numbers of stocked bonytail and razorback sucker with most stocking goals met or exceeded.
- Refined the web-based Species Tagging, Research and Monitoring System (STReaMS) with individuals and detections growing over time.
- Created standardized cross-basin data collection and supporting mechanisms to evaluate trends over larger geographic areas.

Research & Monitoring

- Completed multiple final reports in various recovery elements.
- Coordinated multiple endangered species monitoring projects, including Colorado pikeminnow adult estimates in the Colorado River, humpback chub adult estimates in Black Rocks and Westwater canyons, and for early life stages of razorback sucker and Colorado pikeminnow throughout the upper Colorado River basin.

Information and Education

- Began redesign of website which will allow for easier updates and continued management by multiple parties. Redesign includes a public facing website as well as inclusion of the San Juan Program in service of program efficiencies.
- Provided all documents digitally for remote Washington DC visits due to COVID 19.
- Continued to provide resources to field offices to support outreach efforts.

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Conducted Program planning and evaluation:

- Reviewed and updated the RIPRAP, documenting changes from previous version; submitted recommended RIPRAP revisions to the technical, Management, and Implementation committees for review; published final, revised RIPRAP (with progress information included) to web.
- Requested, revised as needed, and posted FY21 project accomplishment reports to the web.
- Continued to implement peer review to ensure the technical and scientific integrity of Recovery Program activities.
- Provided updates of depletion consultations. Through December 2021, the Program had provided Endangered Species Act Compliance for more than 2,100 water projects which can deplete more than 2.86 million acre-feet of water from the upper basin.
- Coordinated stakeholder discussions about what the Program may look like when the current Cooperative Agreements expire in 2023. In FY19, we developed a selection tool to gather input on the scope of the Program after 2023, based on the input of subject matter experts across the Program. The results were finalized for discussion by representatives of the Management Committee during FY20. Discussions continue around the possible sources of funding available after 2023.

Monitored the FY21 Recovery Program annual budget and modified as necessary.

- Developed annual funding table.
- Monitored payment and expenditure of Section 7 funds in the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation account.
- Calculated FY 2023 annual agency contributions and depletion charge increases based on the Consumer Price Index.
- Assisted with preparations for non-Federal Program participants' Recovery Program trip to Washington, D.C. to brief key people in the Department of the Interior, the Office of Management and Budget, national environmental groups, Congressional delegations, and authorizing and appropriation committees. Supported the revision of these meetings to an online format because of COVID-19 concerns.

Provided staff assistance to the Implementation, Management, and technical committees:

- Prepared and distributed agendas and related documents in coordination with committee chairs. Arranged meetings and conference calls. Continued using web conferencing where applicable.
- Prepared and promptly distributed concise, accurate meeting summaries. Coordinated presentations at Annual Researchers Meeting.
- Maintained Recovery Program administrative record (primarily on web).
- Provided additional staff assistance to committees as needed.
- Recovery Program committee and related activities publicized on the Program list-server and posted on Program web pages.
- Attended Implementation, Management, and technical committee meetings.
- Maintained Recovery Program technical report library and database.
- Continued to maintain the fws-coloriver electronic mailing list for Program participants as well as a contact list for all committees and interested parties.
- Continued to revise and maintain Program website with up to date information.

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Directed and coordinated Service activities related to the Recovery Program.

- Began revision of Colorado pikeminnow Recovery Goals, following completion of the SSA.
- Published a proposed rule to reclassify razorback sucker to threatened status.
- Drafted final rule to reclassify humpback chub to threatened status.
- Administered funding for Service Recovery Program activities.
- Conducted monthly Service conference call.
- Coordinated with and provided staff support to Service management on Recovery Program activities and issues. Drafted and coordinated Regional Director approval of the 2019-2020 Sufficient Progress memo; drafted the 2020-2021 version.
- Provided annual Recovery Data Call information.

Fish and Wildlife Service Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office staff:

- Provided technical expertise and recommendations to the Biology Committee as requested.
- Participated in Biology Committee meetings and Service conference calls.
- Provided technical expertise to the Flaming Gorge Technical Workgroup, 15-Mile Reach coordination calls, and other groups as needed.

Additional noteworthy observations:

None

Recommendations:

- Complete Final Rule to reclassify (downlist) razorback sucker;
- Finalize a plan for Program structure after 2023;
- Continue to work with stakeholders to provide appropriate flows in upper basin rivers;
- Continue emphasis on nonnative fish management, especially in completing capital structures to prevent nonnative fish escapement from Ridgway Reservoir;
- Continue to manage floodplain habitats to benefit razorback sucker;
- Continue to upload and manage data in STReAMS; and
- Continue outreach activities in the basin to promote the value of the Program to local communities.

Project Status:

On track, ongoing, complete, etc.

FY 2021 Budget Status

Funds Provided: \$991,767

Funds Expended: In review

Difference: In review, but enough carry-over funds identified to allow reduction in FY21 funding for this and some other Service projects that will cover overall Program budget shortfall.

Percent of the FY 2021 work completed, and projected costs to complete: 100%

Recovery Program funds spent for publication charges: \$0

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Status of Data Submission

Not applicable

Signed:

Julie Stahli

Program Director

12/29/21