

# UPPER COLORADO RIVER ENDANGERED FISH RECOVERY PROGRAM

FY 2022 ANNUAL REPORT

PROJECT: 3

## **Project Title**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Program Management

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

R18PG40060

## **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

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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 FY22 accomplishments include publishing the [final rule to reclassify humpback chub from endangered status to threatened](#); submitting a final revised Recovery Plan for Colorado pikeminnow to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for approval and publication; coordinating water releases and flow management to improve habitat conditions for threatened and 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 digital 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

## UPPER COLORADO RIVER ENDANGERED FISH RECOVERY PROGRAM

### **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.
- 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 2022 Tasks and Deliverables, Discussion of Initial Findings and Shortcomings:**

#### Program Director & Staff

Directed and coordinated implementation of recovery efforts as described in the Program's Recovery Implementation Program Recovery Action Plan (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) outreach, information, education, and public involvement. Program coordinators are: David Graf for instream flow protection<sup>1</sup> and fish passage/screen maintenance; Kevin McAbee for nonnative fish management, research and monitoring, and humpback chub species lead; Tildon Jones for habitat management, research and monitoring, and Colorado pikeminnow species lead; Chris Michaud for database management; Koreen Zelasko for propagation, research and monitoring, and razorback sucker species lead; Paul Badame for Program management, budget oversight, and committee coordination; Mike Gross for outreach activities<sup>2</sup> during a 3-month detail; and Shannon Nelson for outreach and communication in fiscal year 2023. Julie Stahl serves as the Program Director.

Significant Program accomplishments/activities in 2022 included:

#### *Instream Flow & Habitat Management*

- Maintained critical flows through designated critical habitats in the Yampa and Colorado Rivers by operating Recovery Program and other leased water releases in coordination with other technical experts, reservoir operators, and river administrators.
- Supported fish screen and fish passage operations with ditch and canal operators by coordination of activities, communication and cost-sharing infrastructure operation and maintenance.
- Coordinated with a White River Planning Team to support White River management planning efforts.
- Green River flow and temperature recommendations ("Evaluation and Suggested Revisions of Flow and Temperature Recommendations for Endangered Fish in the Green River Downstream of

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of David's instream flow actions are covered by Project 19

<sup>2</sup> Formerly called I&E for information and education

## UPPER COLORADO RIVER ENDANGERED FISH RECOVERY PROGRAM

Flaming Gorge Dam", LaGory et al. 2019) was approved by the Program technical committees in November 2019 and the Management Committee approved in June of 2022.

- Continued operation of Flaming Gorge Dam under the Biological Opinion and ROD to implement three flow experiments: the larval trigger study plan, a flow-spike to disadvantage smallmouth bass reproduction, and summer base flows. The dam was operated to meet spring Green River flow targets and recommended base flow temperatures in Reach 1 and at the confluence with the Yampa River. The Stirrup wetland construction was completed and operated successfully in 2022.
- 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*

- Continued to implement Upper Colorado River Basin Nonnative and Invasive Aquatic Species Prevention and Control Strategy.
- Continued coordination of in-river nonnative fish removal efforts over 600+ miles of river, focusing on disrupting spawning when possible. Walleye, northern pike, and smallmouth bass are the primary targets, but other nonnative species are removed when encountered.
- Prevented escapement of illegally introduced smallmouth bass by completing installation of a spillway screen at Ridgway Reservoir. Program stakeholders continue to work towards permanent fish escapement prevention projects at Catamount and Starvation<sup>3</sup> Reservoirs and smaller off-channel water bodies.
- Implemented a flow spike from Flaming Gorge Reservoir to disrupt smallmouth bass spawning on a landscape scale for the second consecutive year.
- Continued to work on a toolkit to reduce the illegal movement of fish into new water bodies.

### *Propagation & Genetics Management*

- Continued hatchery production and numbers of stocked bonytail and razorback sucker with most stocking goals met or exceeded.
- Transferred 25 humpback chub from Desolation and Gray canyons into the Ouray National Fish Hatchery Randlett Unit to support genetic refuge of this population and possible use as a propagation broodstock.

### *Data Management*

- 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.

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<sup>3</sup> A temporary fish screen has been in place at Starvation Reservoir since 2015.

## UPPER COLORADO RIVER ENDANGERED FISH RECOVERY PROGRAM

### *Research & Monitoring*

- Supported the completion of multiple final or past due reports relating to survival and abundance of stocked razorback sucker and abundance estimates of humpback chub in Black Rocks and Westwater Canyon.
- 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.

### *Outreach,*

- Launched redesigned website which allows for easier updates and continued management by multiple parties. Redesign included a public facing website as well as inclusion of the San Juan River Basin Recovery Implementation Program to increase program efficiencies.
- Provided all documents digitally for non-federal partners to complete remote Washington DC briefings for congressional members and agency leadership.
- Continued to provide resources to field offices to support outreach efforts.
- Participated in multiple venues to present information about Recovery Program activities, at the request of partners or outside stakeholders.
- Continued the innovative Fish Hatchery Program at Palisade High School in Palisade, CO where students released about 250 razorback sucker fish into the Colorado River in May, 2022, that they raised since the previous fall.
- Began explorations around starting a comparable high school fish hatchery program in Vernal, UT.

### *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 Program website.
- Requested, revised as needed, and posted FY21 project accomplishment reports to Program website.
- Continued to implement peer review to ensure the technical and scientific integrity of Recovery Program activities.
- Provided updates of depletion consultations. Through December 2022, 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.

## UPPER COLORADO RIVER ENDANGERED FISH RECOVERY PROGRAM

*Monitored the FY22 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 2024 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.

*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 Program website).
- Provided additional staff assistance to committees as needed.
- Recovery Program committee and related activities publicized on the Program list-server and posted on Program website.
- Attended Implementation, Management, and technical committee meetings.
- Maintained Recovery Program technical report library and database.
- Continued to maintain the fws-colorriver 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.

*Directed and coordinated Service activities related to the Recovery Program.*

- Completed revision of Colorado pikeminnow Recovery Plan and submitted for public review.
- Finalized the reclassification of humpback chub to threatened status on November 17, 2021.
- 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.

## UPPER COLORADO RIVER ENDANGERED FISH RECOVERY PROGRAM

### **Additional noteworthy observations:**

None

### **Recommendations:**

- Finalize a plan for Program structure after September 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;
- Coordinate Program prioritization and expenditure of FY23 and FY24 funds Reclamation received through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) for capital projects;
- 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 all affected communities.

### **Project Status:**

On track, ongoing, complete, etc.

### **FY 2022 Budget Status**

Funds Provided: \$999,550

Funds Expended: In review

Difference: In review, but enough carry-over funds identified to allow reduction in FY22 funding for this and some other Service projects that will cover overall Program budget shortfall.

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

Recovery Program funds spent for publication charges: \$0

### **Status of Data Submission**

Not applicable

### **Signed:**

Julie Stahli

Program Director

12/27/22