

UPPER COLORADO RIVER ENDANGERED FISH RECOVERY PROGRAM

FY 2023 ANNUAL REPORT

PROJECT: 3

Project Title

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Program Management

Bureau of Reclamation Agreement Number:

R23PG00128

Project/Grant Period:

Start date: 10/1/2022

End date: 9/30/2027

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 2023 accomplishments include FWS publication of the revised Recovery Plan for Colorado pikeminnow; submitting a reclassification and 4(d) rule for razorback sucker 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 more digital platforms; and managing the Program's annual budget.

Study Schedule:

1989-Ongoing

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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.
- VII.C.2 Implement a comprehensive data management plan.

Accomplishment of 2023 Tasks and Deliverables, Discussion of Initial Findings and Shortcomings:

Program Director & Staff

Directed and coordinated implementation of recovery efforts as described in the 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 and genetics; e) research, monitoring, and data management; and d) outreach and communication. Program coordinators are: David Graf for instream flow protection¹ and fish passage/screen maintenance; Kevin McAbee² 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; and Shannon Nelson for outreach and communication in fiscal year 2023. Julie Stahli serves as the Program Director.

Significant Program accomplishments/activities in 2023 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.
- Worked with contractors to develop the 15-Mile Reach Study Plan in response to ES's concerns regarding implementation of the 15-MR PBO.
- Continued operation of Flaming Gorge Dam under the Biological Opinion and ROD to implement flow experiments: the larval trigger study plan, and summer base flows for Colorado pikeminnow.

¹ The majority of David's instream flow actions are covered by Project 19

² Kevin McAbee left the PDO in July and his position was not refilled during 2023

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A flow spike was not implemented because of the overlapping hatch dates of smallmouth bass and Colorado pikeminnow. 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.

- 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

- Managed nonnative PIs to provide six combined reports on smallmouth bass (Yampa, Colorado, Green, and White), northern pike, and walleye to provide more comprehensive information to decision makers. This effort will be assessed and amended over time but will change how annual reports appear on the website as of 2023.
- 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.
- Program stakeholders continue to work towards permanent fish escapement prevention projects at Catamount and Starvation³ Reservoirs and smaller off-channel water bodies.
- State wildlife agencies have completed the first version of an outreach and communication toolkit to reduce the illegal movement of fish into new water bodies. The PDO continued to work with the wildlife agencies to refine the cohesiveness of the messaging among the states and to broaden the use of the toolkit to other Recovery Program partners.

Propagation & Genetics Management

- Worked with Reclamation and hatcheries to distribute BIL funds for hatchery improvements at The Ouray Hatchery – Randlett, Ouray Hatchery – Grand Valley, and Wahweap State Fish Hatchery.
- Kicked off discussion about current hatchery practices and goals which will likely result in changing targets for both razorback sucker and bonytail in coming years.
- Engaged with hatchery staff around best practices, one of which was examining the number and age of fish on station and encouraging stocking of most fish onto the landscape. This will likely mean that numerical targets will be exceeded in 2024 and possibly not hit in 2025 or 2026. The BC has approved this change in support of ensuring that we are attending to all aspects of rearing and not just numerical targets.

Data Management

- Refined the web-based Species Tagging, Research and Monitoring System (STReAMS) with individuals and detections growing over time.

³ A temporary fish screen has been in place at Starvation Reservoir since 2015.

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- Developed tools to collect and synthesize data from multiple PIs in a consistent manner which has provided the foundation for the combined nonnative reporting mentioned above.
- Created standardized cross-basin data collection and supporting mechanisms to evaluate trends over larger geographic areas.
 - The PDO has gained approval to develop a web-based data collection system that will support PIs and reduce errors in uploads.

Research & Monitoring

- Coordinated multiple species monitoring projects, including Colorado pikeminnow adult estimates in the Green River, humpback chub adult estimates in Desolation and Gray canyons, and for early life stages of razorback sucker and Colorado pikeminnow throughout the upper Colorado River Basin.

Outreach & Communication

- Implemented work planning changes through combined office scopes of work that allow field offices to submit outreach project proposals based on local, on-the-ground needs.
- Continued to refine the Colorado and San Juan Programs' new website to improve usability and organization.
- 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 2023, that they raised since the previous fall.
- Provided funding for a comparable high school fish hatchery program in Vernal, UT.

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 FY22 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 2023, the Program had provided Endangered Species Act Compliance for more than 2,500 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 extended Cooperative Agreements expire in 2024.

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Monitored the FY23 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 depletion charge and agency contribution 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-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.

Directed and coordinated Service activities related to the Recovery Program.

- Published revision of Colorado pikeminnow Recovery Plan.
- 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 2022 Sufficient Progress memo.
- Provided annual Recovery Data Call information for ECOS.

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.

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Recommendations:

- Integrate the new pikeminnow recovery plan, Recovery Implementation Strategy actions into the RIPRAP for 2025.
- Revise the RIPRAP terminology, schedules, and processes under sections VII.A.1, 2, 3, 5 to reflect the current recovery planning processes and documents used by the FWS.
- Create a standard digital data collection application and data management system for all fishery field data collection and management. Use a third-party vendor with appropriate experience to create a system that is functional and meets data management standards for both state and federal agencies.

Project Status:

On track, ongoing

FY 2023 Budget Status

BOR Funds Provided: \$297,294

FWS Funds Provided: \$730,000

Funds Expended: In review

Difference: In review

Percent of the FY 2023 work completed, and projected costs to complete: 100%

Recovery Program funds spent for publication charges: \$0

Status of Data Submission

Not applicable

Signed:

Julie Stahl

Program Director