

I. Project Title: Management of easements acquired for the Recovery Program

II. Principal Investigator:

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III. Project Summary:

Colorado River Wildlife Management Area (CRWMA) was established in July 1998 with the first acquisition of 425 acres of floodplain habitat on the Green River in the upper Colorado River Basin. There are currently 955 acres contained within the CRWMA as 13 individual properties in both Utah and Colorado. The CRWMA has a boundary that includes up to 10,000 acres on the combined river reaches of the upper Colorado, Gunnison, and Green River system. New property additions are actively pursued and purchased as they become available.

The primary purpose of the CRWMA is to protect and restore backwater floodplain habitat for the endangered razorback sucker, Colorado pikeminnow, humpback chub, and bonytail chub. The type of habitat to be restored is flooded bottomland that is directly connected to the rivers during seasonal flooding. These shallow wetlands provide food, shelter, and resting areas for the fish.

The refuge serves to protect and restore the riparian ecosystem. Riparian areas in the upper Colorado River Basin have been severely altered by reduced flows, development, and gravel mining. These shallow wetlands play a significant role in maintaining both the terrestrial and aquatic values of the system.

The areas are held as conservation easements with willing landowners, who agree to allow management and protection activities by refuge officials. Public use is not permitted as the right to access the property is retained by the landowner. The easement rights are limited only to those necessary to protect and restore habitat for the endangered fishes in order to reduce impacts on private property rights and local communities. Management activities are limited to manipulation or removal of dikes or levees to induce or improve flooding, biological studies or surveys, control of non-native vegetation, and easement monitoring and enforcement.

The goal of the CRWMA is to monitor and manage easements acquired by the Recovery Program for the purpose of supporting and sustaining recovery of the endangered fishes. The objectives are to restore, enhance, and/or protect floodplain

habitats to benefit endangered fishes while maintaining positive relationships with CRWMA landowners.

IV. Study Schedule:

All easements are checked aerially for compliance once each year during spring runoff (May). The objective is to detect all activities which may constitute a violation of the floodplain easement contracts. Such violations would include alterations in floodplain topography or hydrology resulting from earth-moving, excavation, and/or construction or operation of flood-control features.

If violations are suspected as a result of the routine aerial flight in May, then follow-up ground inspections will be conducted as soon as possible. Otherwise, routine annual on-the-ground inspections are made in September or October. This step will eliminate more suspected violations. Once a violation is confirmed, it must be investigated and documented in detail.

V. Relationship to RIPRAP:

-GREEN RIVER ACTION PLAN: MAINSTEM  
ACTIVITY II. RESTORE HABITAT

II.A. Restore and manage flooded bottomland habitat.

-COLORADO RIVER ACTION PLAN: MAINSTEM  
ACTIVITY II. RESTORE HABITAT

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-COLORADO RIVER ACTION PLAN: GUNNISON RIVER  
ACTIVITY II. RESTORE HABITAT

II.A. Restore and manage flooded bottomland habitat.

Easements are located within priority geographic areas which include the Green River floodplain between Pariette Draw (RM 238) and Dinosaur National Monument (RM 318); the Gunnison River floodplain between Escalante SWA (RM 50) and the North Fork (RM 75) and the Whitewater area; and the Colorado River floodplain between Westwater (RM 127) and Rifle (RM 240).

VI. Accomplishment of FY 2001 Tasks and Deliverables, Discussion of Initial Findings and Shortcomings:

1. The Green River easements were monitored aerially in May of 2001, and photos were taken in order to document baseline land use practices for future reference.
2. Ground inspections of each easement has been conducted at least once within the last year, and all landowners have been met with in person or contacted by telephone.
3. There have not been any pre-construction meetings to date.
4. No permits were issued in 2001.
5. Colorado Division of Parks has been notified of an easement violation on the Bounds property and is taking steps to resolve the issue.

6. The CRWMA is now playing a more active role in the easement acquisition process. Staff conducted site assessments of 23 potential easement properties on the Colorado and Gunnison Rivers in 2001. This review process is integral to the future functioning of CRWMA as a cohesive unit, and serves to illuminate any potential future management concerns or liabilities.

7. CRWMA staff have been working with the Bureau of Reclamation to plan for the transfer of 5 fee title wildlife properties totaling 2,200 acres of floodplain habitat on the Colorado River. These five parcels were established as mitigation for wildlife habitat loss resulting from the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Project. The areas are managed by Reclamation under agreements with Colorado Division of Wildlife, Mesa County Land Trust, and Colorado State Parks. Reclamation is committed to paying operation and maintenance costs for these lands for fifty years (currently requested at \$366,000/year). Those funds would be transferred to the Service with the property, along with facilities and equipment.

8. Easements have been acquired on 955 acres (13 properties) as of December 2001. Offers are currently out on an additional ~724 acres (15 properties), and another 25 properties are in various stages of the acquisition process. Easements acquired by the Recovery Program are transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for management as part of the CRWMA established in July 1999.

9. An easement management manual has been developed for acquired easements (“Administrative and Enforcement Guidelines and Procedures for Management of Perpetual Floodplain Easements, Colorado River Wildlife Management Area” dated April 3, 2000).

## VII. Recommendations:

1. There are a number of properties within the acquisition zone on the Green River which have not been followed up on since the owner refused the original offer for an easement. It is likely that several of these properties have since changed ownership. The CRWMA believes that there may be a potential to develop new offers, so there should be additional research on acquiring new easements on the Green River.

2. CRWMA has no funding or equipment to conduct habitat management activities within the easements despite an urgent need for control of noxious weeds. It is hoped that future funding can be secured for this and other habitat improvement projects which will restore ecosystem integrity to these valuable and dwindling riparian habitats.

3. CRWMA has no dedicated vehicle or facilities. The management area is fortunate to have access to a vehicle, office space, and office equipment provided by Ouray NWR. It is hoped that funding will be forthcoming for equipment and facilities in the future.

## VIII. Project Status: On track and ongoing

There have not been any significant changes in project direction, probability of project success, or alignment with RIPRAP objectives or deadlines. However, the funding need for effective management of the easements exceeds the current annual budget allotment. These funds do not fully cover the salary and benefits for the Refuge Operation Specialist, travel, training, aerial monitoring, equipment, or other costs necessary to properly manage the easements.

IX. FY 2001 Budget Status

- I. Funds Provided: \$50K
- II. Funds Expended: \$50K (GS-9 salary)
- III. Difference: 0
- IV. Percent of the FY 2001 work completed, and projected costs to complete: 100%
- V. Recovery Program funds spent for publication charges: 0

X. Status of Data Submission: Not applicable

XI. Signed Lance Koch, CRWMA 1/7/02  
Principal Investigator Date