

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

II. Principal Investigator:

Dan Alonso, Project Leader, Ouray NWR/CRWMA
HC 69 Box 232
Randlett, Ut. 84063
dan_alonso@fws.gov
(435) 545-2522 x 222
(435) 545-2369 Fax

III. Project Summary:

The Colorado River Wildlife Management Area (CRWMA) was established in July 1998. It is recognized as one of the 540 Refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Easements and fee title parcels are located in both Utah and Colorado along the Green, Gunnison, and Colorado Rivers.

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. 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 primarily as conservation easements and limited fee title ownership 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 nonnative vegetation, and easement monitoring and enforcement.

The goal of the CRWMA is to monitor and manage easements and fee title lands 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.

There are currently 13 easements and one fee title parcel totaling 853.5 acres which have been purchased and transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. One additional easement (Thunder Ranch) has been purchased by the Bureau of Reclamation and is pending transfer to the Service. New acquisitions of easements and fee title parcels have been halted with only one or two exceptions.

IV. Study Schedule:

Initial year: 1998

Final year: No final year

All easements are monitored aerially and/or from the ground for compliance on an annual basis during the spring and/or fall. The objective is to detect all activities which may constitute a violation of the terms of the easement. Possible violations include alterations in floodplain topography or hydrology resulting from earth-moving, excavation, filling/dumping, construction, and tampering with flood-control features.

If violations are suspected as a result of the routine monitoring the matter will be investigated and documented in detail. If a violation is confirmed, the responsible landowner will be contacted and given the opportunity to correct the matter. If the matter cannot be corrected and/or the landowner refuses to comply a violation notice will be issued.

V. Relationship to RIPRAP:

GREEN RIVER ACTION PLAN: MAINSTEM

II. Restore habitat

II.A. Restore and manage flooded bottomland habitat.

COLORADO RIVER ACTION PLAN: MAINSTEM

II. Restore habitat

II.A. Restore and manage flooded bottomland habitat.

COLORADO RIVER ACTION PLAN: GUNNISON RIVER

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 2003 Tasks and Deliverables, Discussion of Initial Findings and Shortcomings:

1. All easements and the one fee title parcel were monitored in 2003 and no violations were detected.
2. All landowners were contacted in person or by telephone.
3. Refuge staff attended numerous meetings with Recovery Program staff and contract engineers on design and proposed construction on the Thunder Ranch and Audubon parcels.
4. Two Special Use Permits were requested in 2003. Two energy corporations, Inland Oil and Gas and Dolar Energy expressed interest in drilling for water and oil, respectively, within the Rex Lamb easement on the Green River. After extensive communication, site visits and mapping efforts, Inland Oil and Gas was able to conduct their water drilling activities outside of the easement. Dolar Energy continues to pursue drilling for oil within the easement, of which they have a right to, but we continue to work toward minimizing negative impacts to our easement interests.
5. The Refuge Operation Specialist (GS-9) position dedicated to the CRWMA became vacant in 2002 and due to: insufficient funds to cover a PCS move, the limited number of easements in place, and the instituted easement moratorium, the Ouray/CRWMA Project Leader decided not to refill the position and administer the CRWMA needs with Ouray NWR staff. Ouray NWR staff time, travel, and associated expenditures spent on the CRWMA are closely documented and charged to the funds allocated by the Recovery Program for the CRWMA. The salary savings from not filling the dedicated position will be used to cover the cost of the incumbent's PCS move and/or salaries of Ouray Refuge staff used in managing the easements.
6. The Bureau of Reclamation's plan to transfer 5 fee-title wildlife properties totaling 2,200 acres of floodplain habitat on the Colorado River continue to be discussed. 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 the Bureau of Reclamation under agreements with Colorado Division of Wildlife, a private entity, and Colorado State Parks. Reclamation is committed to paying operation and maintenance costs for these lands for fifty years. Funding would be transferred to the Service with the property, along with facilities and equipment.

7. As of December 2003 a total of 853.5 acres (14 properties) have been transferred to the Service from the Bureau of Reclamation. A moratorium on the acquisition of any additional easements was instituted by the Management Committee, with very few exceptions. The Thunder Ranch easement, on the Green River was acquired by the Bureau and is pending transfer to the Service.

VII. Recommendations:

1. There are numerous properties within the acquisition zone on the Green River which have changed ownership and are worth pursuing. Refuge staff believes that every effort must be made to acquire as many easements as possible. Easement acquisition has fallen grossly short of the original goal of 10,000 acres. It is inconceivable to believe that recovery of the endangered Colorado River fishes can be achieved without preserving adequate habitat.
2. A thorough evaluation of the Colorado River Wildlife Management Area should be conducted to evaluate its value to fish and designation as a National Wildlife Refuge. The limited acquired acreage does not afford the habitat needs necessary to self sustain a viable population of endangered Colorado River fishes. Other habitats in public and private ownership do not provide long term preservation.
3. CRWMA has no funding for equipment or additional staffing 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. We are not required to control the weeds but we do reserve the right to do so under the terms of the easement.
4. 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:

Easement management is on task and on going. Easement acquisition on the other hand has, for the most part, been halted. Funding needed for effective management and habitat enhancement of the easements exceeds the current annual budget allotment. These funds do not fully cover the salary and benefits for the assigned staff, travel, training, fuel, vehicle maintenance, signs, postage, aerial monitoring, equipment, or other costs necessary to properly manage the easements.

IX. FY 2003 Budget Status:

- A. Funds Provided: \$50.0K
- B. Funds Expended: \$ 5.8K (Travel and salary)

All available funds were deliberately not spent in an attempt to amass the necessary funds to cover the costs associated with a PCS move and salary for the allotted easement management position.

- C. Difference: \$44.2K
- D. Percent of the FY 2003 work completed, and projected costs to complete: 50%
- E. Recovery Program funds spent for publication charges: N/A

X. Status of Data Submission: N/A

XI.	Signed	<u>Dan Alonso, Project Leader, Ouray/CRWMA</u>	<u>12/15/03</u>
		Principal Investigator	Date