U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Releases Biological Opinion On Management of Missouri River

WASHINGTON - A team of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service experts today issued an amended biological opinion on the Corps of Engineers' proposed operation of the Missouri River that includes specific biological targets that must be met to protect three threatened and endangered species while respecting the needs of those who depend on the river for water, navigation, power and recreation.

The amended opinion retains the vast majority of the measures included in the 2000 biological opinion but incorporates for the first time a performance-based approach, giving the Corps' great flexibility to manage the river while providing equal or greater conservation benefits to the threatened piping plover and the endangered pallid sturgeon and least tern.

Among other things, the biological opinion proposes an aggressive watershed approach, habitat creation and restoration, test rises along the river and an adaptive management and monitoring program. The opinion includes specific measures to address spawning cues and habitat improvement for the sturgeon. This comprehensive approach builds on measures endorsed by the National Academy of Science when it conducted its review of the Missouri River science in 2000.

"The amended biological opinion outlines a clear plan of action the Corps must take to comply with the Endangered Species Act," Service Director Steve Williams said. "For the next two years, the Corps has the opportunity to implement alternative measures that are expected to achieve biological benefits for the three species. If the Corps fails to adequately plan for sturgeon spawning flows and the creation of sufficient habitat for all three species, the opinion provides for a specific flow regime for the river that would become effective in 2006."

In reviewing the most recent scientific data, the team determined that the status of both piping plovers and least terns on the river has been improving in recent years. Piping plovers numbers have increased by 460 percent within the Missouri River basin since 1997 and pair counts now exceed the recovery goals.

The number of adult least terns has increased since the 2000 Biological Opinion, and the current estimate of more than 12,000 least terns exceeds the recovery goal of 7,000 terns, although the goal of 2,100 terns for the Missouri River itself has not been met.

The status of the endangered pallid sturgeon, however, has not improved, and the species continues to be of significant concern to Service biologists. Over the next two years, the Corps has the opportunity to evaluate several measures that are expected to benefit the sturgeon in particular, including the feasibility of a temperature-control device at Fort Peck.

The persistent drought in the region was a significant factor in the team's opinion, said Dale Hall, the Service's regional director for the Southeast Region who was one of two team leaders.

"The review team's recommendations take into account the significant drought conditions throughout much of the Missouri River Basin," Hall, a fishery biologist, said. "For this reason, we agreed that the Corps should have until March of 2006 to meet our biological targets for the sturgeon. We recognize that without a substantial snow pack this winter, it would be difficult at best for the Corps to meet that recommendation next year. Our recommendation allows the Corps and stakeholders along the river the flexibility they need."

The 15-member team developed the 311-page amendment to the Service's 2000 Biological Opinion after the Corps sought to reinitiate consultation on its Biological Assessment in November 2003 as required under the Endangered Species Act. The Corps' Biological Assessment covers management of the Missouri River Main Stem Reservoir System, Missouri River Bank Stabilization and Navigation Project, and Kansas River Reservoir System. This new round of activity was triggered by new information relating to least tern and piping plover populations and the designation of "critical habitat" for the piping plover across a significant section of the Missouri River Basin.

Today's action by the Service clears the way for the Corps to begin work on an Environmental Impact Statement, seek public comment, and ultimately complete development of its Master Manual that will govern management of the Missouri River's system of six main-stem dams and reservoirs.

In its analysis, the review team recognized that the Corps' 2003 Biological Assessment accepted most of the Service's reasonable and prudent alternative issued in the agency's 2000 Biological Opinion, but it proposed replacing the Service's recommendations involving flow changes for the river. In addition, the Corps proposed a modified drought conservation plan, Gavins Point Dam summer releases, accelerated construction of shallow water habitat, pallid sturgeon hatchery improvements, accelerated pallid sturgeon brood stock collection, and adaptive management techniques including research, monitoring, and flow tests.

The team of 13 biologists is led by Hall and Robyn Thorson, regional director of the Service's Big Rivers - Great Lakes Region. It was established in early November and packed 135 days worth of work into fewer than 45 days. A majority of the team members either worked directly on the 2000 Biological Opinion or on Missouri River issues during their careers.

The Endangered Species Act requires federal agencies to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure that actions they authorize, fund, or carry out will not jeopardize listed species. In cases where the Service determines the proposed action will jeopardize the species, it must issue a "biological opinion" offering "reasonable and prudent alternatives" about how the proposed action could be modified to avoid jeopardy to the species.

To download a copy of the Service's biological opinion and other materials related to the Missouri River and the conservation of its natural resources please visit www.fws.gov.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Services manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which includes 542 wildlife refuges

and thousands small wetlands, waterfowl production areas, and other special management areas. It operates 69 national fish hatcheries and 64 fishery resource centers. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and assists foreign governments with their conservation efforts. The Service also manages the Federal Aid program, which distributes more than $500 million generated from excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies for conservation. For more information about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service please visit http://www.fws.gov.

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