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United States Department of the Interior
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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IN REPLY REFER TO:
FA/SE/WPRS--Delores Project
CO (6-5-80-F-244)

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JUN 9 1980

MEMORANDUM

TO: Regional Director, Upper Colorado Region
Water and Power Resources Service, Salt Lake City, Utah

FROM: Regional Director, Region 6
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Denver, Colorado

SUBJECT: Biological Opinion for Dolores Project, Colorado

In response to your March 12, 1980, request for formal consultation on the Dolores Project, this biological opinion has been prepared as prescribed in the Interagency Cooperation Regulations published in the January 4, 1978, Federal Register and the Endangered Species Act, as amended.

BIOLOGICAL OPINION

The proposed Dolores Project is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the bald eagle (Haliaeetus leucocephalus), American peregrine falcon (Falco peregrinus anatum), black-footed ferret (Mustela nigripes), Uinta Basin hookless cactus (Sclerocactus glaucus), and Mesa Verde cactus (Sclerocactus mesa-verde).

However, the proposed project will likely jeopardize the continued existence of the endangered Colorado squawfish (Ptychocheilus lucius), bonytail chub (Gila elegans), and humpback chub (Gila cypha).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Dolores Project would be located in Montezuma and Dolores Counties in southwest Colorado and would divert water from the Dolores River Basin to the San Juan River Basin. The project would include McPhee Reservoir on the Dolores River, the smaller Monument Creek and Dawson Draw Reservoirs in the San Juan River Basin, and two major conveyance systems. An average of 131,000 acre-feet of water annually would be depleted from the Dolores River for the irrigation of 26,300 acres of supplemental service land and



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35,360 acres of full service land, for municipal and industrial use, and for fish and wildlife enhancement. Part of the water would also be provided for the Ute Mountain Ute Indian Reservation. The project would include recreational facilities and acquisition and development of land for wildlife. Snowmelt floods on the Dolores River would be controlled. A 9-year construction period is anticipated.

BASIS FOR OPINION - Jeopardized Species

The Colorado squawfish, humpback chub, and bonytail chub were once abundant throughout the Colorado River System from the Gulf of California to southwestern Wyoming. Presently the squawfish is limited to the upper mainstem and major tributaries of the Colorado River System. The humpback chub and the bonytail chub are found only in limited areas within the river system in Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. The primary cause of decline for these fish species is human alteration and degradation of the river environment. Major impoundments and water diversions have depleted water supplies and altered temperature, turbidity, and stream flows, thus reducing habitat for endemic fishes.

A less important cause of decline may be the increased numbers of exotic fishes such as carp and channel catfish, but this increase in exotics is also a function of habitat changes. Although correlations exist between declining native fish populations and increasing populations of exotic fish, cause and effect are not fully understood. However, we believe that if the river more closely resembled its natural state, fewer exotic fishes would be present.

We do not know all the specific requirements and exact distributions of the Colorado squawfish, bonytail chub, and humpback chub. This is true partly because these fishes, as for most rare species, have been of little interest to society until recent years. Also, these fishes are difficult to capture or observe because the waters they inhabit are usually swift and turbid and access to many of the canyon reaches is limited. However, we are intensively studying the endangered fishes of the Colorado and Green Rivers and have described the Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) intensive study of the fishes in previous biological opinions: Upalco, Dallas Creek, and the Strawberry Aqueduct and Collection System.

The primary area of concern in this opinion is the Colorado River from its confluence with the Dolores River downstream to Hite Marina (approximately 142 river miles). At present, we do not have sufficient data to show the Dolores River itself is essential for recovery of the Colorado squawfish, humpback chub, or bonytail chub. Also, records do not identify the Dolores River as important habitat for these three species. Therefore, we are concerned primarily with Colorado River habitat downstream of the confluence of the Dolores and Colorado Rivers.