

RIPSWG
1999

DRAFT - First Meeting Summary

Notes

**First meeting of the Recovery Implementation Plan Scientific Workgroup
for the Lower Colorado River Basin**

February 17-18, 1999 - Lower Colorado Regional Office, USBR, Boulder City, NV.

Recovery Implementation Plan Scientific Workgroup (RIPSWG) prospective members present: T. Burke, USBR; J. Sjoberg, NDOW; O. Gorman, USFWS; C. Hayes, CGFD; K. Young, AGFD; J. Deacon, UNLV; W. Minckley, ASU; P. Marsh, ASU; B. Matthews, OU; G. Mueller, USGS BRD; D. Propst, NMDGF; C. Minckley, USFWS. Support personnel & observers: G. Gould, USBR; S. Leon, P. Stine, L. Fitzpatrick, M. Ulibarri, C. Figiel, C. Martinez, R. Williams, L. Murphy, USFWS; R. Bettaso, T. Liles, AGFD.

Leon convened the meeting shortly after 9:00 a.m. Prospective members and support personnel introduced themselves. Leon outlined the objectives of the RIPSWG. These included: 1) defining recovery for the four "big-river" endangered fishes in the lower Colorado River basin; 2) defining measurable recovery criteria; 3) developing recovery recommendations; and 4) considering conservation measures for other priority candidate fishes. Leon stated that the challenge was complete a draft within as short a time frame as possible, preferably in about eight months. The reason for the short time frame is a critical need for a plan to guide and coordinate ongoing and future efforts to conserve and recover "big-river" fishes. There is as yet no formal funding to support plan development. Leon has pieced together enough funding to support it for a time, but it is essentially an unfunded mandate.

Discussion then turned to working with an implementation team (IT). Leon explained that recovery planning efforts are encouraged, if not expected, to include meaningful participation of stakeholders throughout the process. Each recovery effort uses a somewhat different approach, but at some point there is expectation that an IT would be formed and the RIPSWG would have an opportunity to discuss recovery recommendations with the participants of that team.

Several RIPSWG members expressed concern about meeting with an IT too early in the process. Deacon stated he was less concerned because stakeholders must buy into the recovery plan or we do not get anything done. Marsh said he thought there was a standard for recovery that superceded agency requirements, and asked what assurance the RIPSWG would have that political pressures would not be brought to bear on agency participants? Leon responded that the RIPSWG process could be thought of in two phases. The first would focus on definition of recovery, recovery criteria, and recovery recommendations. He believed this phase would be nearly immune from political pressures because the charge to the RIPSWG committee was clear. The second phase, however, includes introducing the document derived in phase one to an IT and wider public review. Leon felt the second phase would not separate science and politics. W. Minckley stated his understanding was the RIPSWG was to be an advisory committee to the Regional Director, and as such needed to be as immune as possible from anything other than biological considerations. Several agreed. Burke said the biological information, including existing recovery plans, needs to be brought together to provide advise and guidance to agencies. W. Minckley agreed, adding that synthesis of that information needs to be in the form of a pure document focused on the level of recovery. He felt a core group of academics was necessary to write the document.

Williams saw no problem in an academic core group writing the plan. Matthews

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leaned toward W. Minckley's vision--the plan needed to be constructed from a purely scientific perspective. Gorman disagreed with the need to have an academic core group. Matthews responded that from his experience, agency folks will not go on record if their boss disagrees. Leon stated that the RIPS WG initiative was important, and he was not concerned with the exact mechanism the participants adopted for writing it, he just wanted it written. Matthews said that an academic core group would be disassociated from politics, and the resulting plan would have scientific credibility. Williams agreed that the core-group concept was an appropriate track because it would allow the RIPS WG to formalize a lower basin recovery document constructed from a credible knowledge base. Mueller agreed with a need to formalize a lower basin plan, stating that earlier plans were never implemented. Young recognized the need to analyze existing plans and incorporate them into the RIPS WG document. He agreed with the necessity to have a scientifically credible first phase, and supported the second phase that sought implementation. Sjoberg also agreed, calling the scientific phase and implementation phase "fundamental needs" of the process. He said "contributing to recovery" was a primary tenant of the Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Plan (MSCP) process, yet the process does not have a definition for recovery, or recovery targets.

Marsh stated that academics publish information. He said that recommendations from the Desert Fishes Recovery Team are seldom acted upon. In his view, the process for developing a lower basin plan should focus on producing a publishable document. Matthews agreed. Sjoberg said he agreed that the document could not be written by committee. W. Minckley said in order to pull the plan together the RIPS WG members would have to know what programs are currently in place. He said it was necessary to place these fish in the context of the existing system. W. Minckley continued, stating that all we have to date is efforts to prevent extinction, and it is his hope that this effort is the first shot at making a change to more proactive activities.

Burke stated existing recovery plans are not interrelated. C. Minckley added that existing recovery plans do not adequately address the lower basin. Burke supported the core group concept, but agencies needed a role. The recovery implementation plan should clearly state where we are, identify resources available, and recovery actions necessary; the agency personnel could funnel much of this information to the core group.

Deacon proposed that the academic core group be himself, W. Minckley, Marsh, and Matthews. Marsh suggested that Mueller be included. All participants generally agreed. W. Minckley clarified the issue, stating that the RIPS WG would be comprised of a core group of academics, and an advisory group of agency biologists. Leon suggested the terms 'core committee' and 'advisory committee'. Matthews suggested the advisory committee would feed existing biological information, plans, etc., to the core, which would have responsibility for writing the plan. The participants generally agreed that the plan would not "go out the door" until it had been reviewed in-depth by the whole committee.

Marsh then asked about the geographic scope. Leon responded that the appointment letters had indicated from Glen Canyon Dam downstream to the Gulf of California. Burke stated that the primary focus should be the mainstem Colorado, and W. Minckley cautioned against diluting the effort, proposing focus on the four "big-river" fishes and candidates (e.g., flannelmouth). Sjoberg suggested focusing on the "big-river" fishes, lower basin-wide. W. Minckley noted there will be gray areas.

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Discussion then turned to operational details and the need for close integration with ongoing projects. The group agreed with need for a clearing house – someone responsible for responding to needs of the committee. Matthews stated he could not accept conventional wisdom, or work with oral history and traditions. He needed information from actual ongoing activities, research, and studies. Matthews prioritized the categories of information necessary as: 1) published studies; 2) final reports; 3) interim reports; 4) anecdotal information; and 5) summaries and bibliographies. W. Minckley added that well-identified assessments were also important. The members briefly discussed use of an open-access system, producing a web page. All agreed, if possible, that a position be established to function as the clearing house on behalf of the RPSWG. In the meantime, Leon will serve that function.

The participants turned their attention to discussion of recovery. W. Minckley stated he did not think we could ever walk away from the lower basin. He said delisting may not be achievable, but downlisting might be possible. Gorman stated that recovery may go on for generations. W. Minckley suggested that moving toward recovery involves maximizing sustainability of the community with minimal human intervention. Deacon noted as long as the river is managed, we must continue to manage the species. W. Minckley said questions of genetics, diseases, etc., have been debilitating to progress. He noted a lack of understanding regarding significance of their longevity and fecundity. We need to provide large populations with high variability, both of which are possible.

Matthews stated that recovery meant self-sustaining populations across the historic range. He said we need to shoot for a high target. He suggested recovery requires natural reproduction with various life stages represented in a reasonable number of years. Burke added that weight should be given to the longevity of these fish. He said recovery of these fish is a “slow-baked pie,” and that we should not bail out because efforts do not work in a given year. W. Minckley said this could be captured in the preface of the plan as one tenant of the recovery process. Each species will have to be dealt with individually, then collectively. Sjoberg agreed, stating that what is good for one may not be good for another.

W. Minckley asked the group to consider which fish would be in the canals and rivers of the lower basin if there were no non-native fish. Burke responded “native fishes”. The group agreed that non-native fishes were a primary concern. W. Minckley mentioned Pres. Clinton’s recent executive order concerning invasive species, and that it may imply that invasive species cannot be introduced. The participants discussed non-native fish issues further, with Matthews querying others about whether problems with non-natives in the lower basin stem primarily from small-bodied fish in numbers, or large-bodied “eating machines”. Williams considered the answer had site-specific, in the Virgin River the problem is red shiner. Gorman stated that lessons could be learned from the Little Colorado River, where continuous flooding switched the system back to humpback chub from fathead minnow and red shiner. Thus modification of hydrologic regimes could be used as one of the weapons available to combat non-natives. Marsh indicated that modifying hydrology to control non-natives was not likely to be possible or successful in the mainstem Colorado.

W. Minckley discussed previous hydrologic modeling of discharge for four independent streams which showed no covariance – the actual volume of flow was unpredictable year-to-year. Data on fish populations over a 35-year period at nine stations on Aravaipa Creek similarly displayed chaos in annual community structure. Matthews discussed the influence of largemouth bass on fish communities. Adult bass maintain

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large open spaces (absence of other fishes) around themselves, primarily because of their eating behavior. Matthews suggested this type of behavior could actually be beneficial to the four endangered fishes. Burke commented that we are at a point where we need to be aggressive.

Mueller stated that the group must consider the reliability of water in the lower basin. W. Minckley said various hydrologic scenarios would be considered. He suggested the plan also needs to account for the different regional climatic regime. Burke queried the group as to what should be done with reservoirs. W. Minckley said that it was not possible to manage the native species in the lower basin without reducing or controlling the threat of non-native species. He said we need to make certain assumptions, and asked the group if anyone thought we could manage endangered fishes in any meaningful way in the face of co-existing non-natives. Burke said it was possible to make in-roads to parity, and he thought you could manage, but not walk away.

W. Minckley stated the necessity of expanding our thinking about these fishes. At one time they were genetically panmictic, with perhaps only an occasional successful spawn – one time occurring in the mouth of the Virgin River, and a decade or more later in the Gila River. He said our best shot may be to maintain, perhaps increase, genetic diversity with a minimum of intervention. Matthews stated the importance of not throwing any idea out *a priori*. Minckley brought up the “idea of trying it”.

The participants then reviewed a figure depicting milestones (levels) that must be attained to reach recovery. It had been developed by W. Minckley, associated with the Lower Basin Management Plan for the “big-river” fishes that was never formally adopted (attached to these summary notes). W. Minckley suggested present progress toward recovery to lie between levels II and III. We have increased our ability to perpetuate existing genetic variability of these fishes, and are beginning to stabilize populations. After discussion, there was general agreement that a recovery implementation plan for the lower basin should encompass recommendations that provide for attaining levels IV and V, wherein populations are expanded and become self-sustaining, respectively. The RIPS WG adjourned for the day.

The second day was spent assigning tasks for development of executive summaries of research and management programs, as follows:

Project	Assignment
1. Lake Mead razorback sucker / multi-agency	Sjoberg
2. Lake Mohave / multi-agency	Burke
3. Havasu Fish Improvement Program / multi-agency	Dolker, C.
	Minckley
4. Imperial Mile 50-80 LCR razorback / AGFD	Bettaso
5. Hatcheries, lower basin:	
a. Willow Beach	Figiel
b. Bubbling Ponds	Young
c. Achii Hanyo	C. Minckley
d. Nyland CA	Hayes
e. Parker Dam stocking programs	C. Minckley
6. BR – RPAs fish stocking	Gould
7. AGFD / Verde River / Salt River reintroductions	Young

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| 8. MSCP | | Worthley |
| 9. Upper basin RIP | | Maddox |
| 10. San Juan RIP | | Propst |
| 11. statewide fishery surveys | | Young, |
| | Sjoberg, | Hayes, |
| | Liles | |
| 12. Grand Canyon Mon. Prog. (GCMRC) | | Gorman |
| 13. Hualapai | | Bravo |
| 14. Virgin River | | Sjoberg |
| 15. Salton Sea | | C. Minckley |
| 16. Senator Wash | | Hayes |
| 17. Canyon Lands, Powell, Mohave, Havasu telemetry | | Mueller |
| 18. past and present stockings | | Stine, Fitzpatrick, |
| | | states |
| 19. CAP RBS | | Clarkson |
| 20. flannelmouth below Davis Dam | | Liles |

Participants agreed that the advisory subcommittee would have 60 days to compile executive summaries, and the core would have equal time to develop an outline of recovery recommendations for the four “big-river” fishes.

Gould and Leon then discussed the proposed two-day symposium/workshop, to be held July 14-15 in Las Vegas. The primary purpose is to have an in-depth treatment of the non-native / native fish issue. Leon asked if the RIPS WG desired to have a session on recovery perspectives for the “big-river” fishes. A majority of the RIPS WG was uncomfortable with a portion of the workshop dedicated to recovery that early in the process.

The committee then determined the standard framework for the executive summaries. The framework agreed to was:

Project Title, with appropriate citation

- Agency, Principal Investigators
- Contract =
- Funding Agency / Source

Project Summary

- objective(s)
- findings / results
- application to recovery (assessment of success / failure)
- related reports / studies

Contact (name, address, phone =)

Participants agreed to submit executive summaries to Leon in electronic format (WP and ASCII preferred).

The next meeting was scheduled for 9 April 1999, 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., in Las Vegas, NV. The meeting adjourned at 12:00 p.m.

