



COLORADO

**Colorado Water
Conservation Board**

Department of Natural Resources

1313 Sherman Street
Denver, CO 80203

P (303) 866-3441

F (303) 866-4474

John Hickenlooper, Governor

Mike King, DNR Executive Director

James Eklund, CWCB Director

TO: Colorado Water Conservation Board Members

FROM: Ted Kowalski and Michelle Garrison
Interstate, Federal & Water Information Section

DATE: May 21, 2015

SUBJECT: Agenda Item 24, Report on NonNative subcommittee work for the Upper
Colorado River Recovery Program (informational item)

Background

The Upper Colorado River Recovery Program (Recovery Program) is a cooperative partnership between the states of Colorado, Wyoming and Utah, Federal agencies including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), Western Area Power Administration (WAPA) and National Park Service (NPS), water users, environmental groups and power interests. The goal of the Recovery Program is to recover four species of endangered fish in the Upper Colorado River basin while allowing water use and development to occur. The program provides Environmental Species Act compliance for over 1200 water projects in Colorado and over 2000 projects throughout the basin. Actions of the program include instream flow identification and protection, habitat restoration, nonnative fish management, propagation and stocking, research and monitoring, and information and education.

Nonnative fish populations have drastically increased throughout the basin in recent years, due in part to drought conditions, escapement of nonnative sportfish from reservoir fisheries and illegal introductions of nonnative sportfish. Nonnative fish species such as smallmouth bass and northern pike are considered incompatible with native species due to high levels of predation of native fish and competition for food and habitat. Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) and Recovery Program staff have conducted extensive nonnative fish removal operations annually, with concerted efforts in particular areas such as the Yampa River basin where the expansion seems to be most problematic.

The Recovery Program considers nonnative fish management to be critical at this time for recovery of the fish and for sufficient progress of the program. After some years of population estimate increases for endangered fish, recent estimates have decreased, resulting in a delay of downlisting efforts for the Colorado pikeminnow.

The Recovery Program is committing additional focus and resources to address the nonnative fish issues. Each state wildlife agency is considering options for further control of problematic species via regulation changes, increased physical removal or containment, chemical treatment, incentives and gradual replacement of certain sportfish in reservoir fisheries with other sportfish species that are considered more compatible with native fish. Some Recovery Program participants have requested that state wildlife agencies develop “must-kill” regulations for nonnative species such as northern pike, smallmouth bass, walleye and burbot to demonstrate to anglers that these species are incompatible and need to be removed. CPW prefers using other measures to achieve the same goals while avoiding a regulation the agency believes would be unenforceable and ineffective in Colorado.



Nonnative Fish Workgroup

A Recovery Program subcommittee workgroup was formed to further discuss and evaluate options and provide recommendations for improved nonnative fish control in Colorado. CPW leads the workgroup and provides biologists, managers and public information specialists to cover all the different aspects of nonnative fish control that need to be considered. Recovery Program participants include representatives from program management and staff, Reclamation, CWCB, water users and environmental groups. The angling community is also represented and provides valuable feedback.

The workgroup has held three meetings and has scheduled three more through August 2015, after which it intends to produce recommendations. Discussion of regulation changes, additional removal and containment, incentives, replacement with more compatible species of sportfish and messaging and public outreach and education has occurred. CPW supports regulation changes to promote additional harvest of nonnative fish but prefers not to develop a “must-kill” regulation for nonnative fish at this time. Harvest incentive programs were researched and discussed and are supported by CPW. Improved public education and outreach and consistent, positive messaging about native fish health is strongly supported by the workgroup. Current actions include:

- CPW will pursue emergency and permanent regulation changes to remove bag and possession limits for certain nonnative species at certain locations. The bag and possession limit for smallmouth bass at Ridgeway was already removed for 2015 and highlighted in the 2015 Colorado Fishing booklet, including a statement about the Recovery Program and general safety of native fish populations.
- CPW is researching how best to deal with issues of waste of game so that anglers can properly dispose of unwanted nonnative fish.
- CPW will research possible uses for unwanted nonnative fish.
- CPW will educate temporary employees about the Recovery Program and the nonnative fish issues.
- CPW is considering adopting some type of messaging such as “catch-and-keep” for certain nonnative species and will work with the Recovery Program information specialist to develop messaging and brochures to improve public education.
- CPW is researching species of nonnative sportfish that are more compatible with native fish populations that would still provide anglers with an enjoyable fishing experience (need fish that are fun to catch and good to eat).
- The Recovery Program office has offered to improve the signage at Elkhead Reservoir.
- The Recovery Program office has offered to provide additional educational materials in a variety of formats to improve public education. CPW and the Recovery Program information specialist will work with the Information and Education Committee to increase and improve messaging.
- The Recovery Program provided information on harvest incentive programs and avoidance of undesirable consequences and perverse incentives.
- CPW will further investigate harvest incentive programs and draft a white paper.

CWCB Support

- CPW will conduct pilot harvest incentive programs at Ridgeway Reservoir and Elkhead Reservoir. Pilots will be evaluated, and larger harvest incentive programs could occur in the

future based on the results. CWCB staff will assist CPW in this effort, and Species Conservation Trust Fund nonnative fish control funding for 2015-16 will be used.

- CWCB agreed to provide \$500,000 from the 2014-15 Species Conservation Trust Fund nonnative fish control funding toward purchase and installation of a net on the Elkhead Reservoir spillway to reduce nonnative fish escapement into the river during reservoir spills. The Recovery Program agreed to help fund the Elkhead net contingent upon CPW developing a management plan for Elkhead Reservoir. CPW is developing the management plan and agreed to help maintain the net. Contracting is underway and the net should be installed by spring 2016.
- 2015-16 Species Conservation Trust Fund nonnative fish control funding will be used for stream restoration efforts at the Walton Creek confluence to reduce pike habitat, for the pilot harvest incentive programs at Ridgeway and Elkhead reservoirs, and for other high priority nonnative fish control actions as determined by CPW and CWCB.

Staff Recommendation

This item is informational only; no action is required by the Board.