



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

Robert Randall, DNR Executive Director

James Eklund, CWCB Director

TO: Colorado Water Conservation Board Members

FROM: Michelle Garrison, Interstate, Federal & Water Information Section

DATE: July 21, 2016

AGENDA ITEM: 22. Report on Non-Native 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. "Must-kill" regulations have been introduced in some states 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 believes



such a regulation would be unenforceable and ineffective in Colorado, and has implemented angler harvest incentive programs as an alternative to regulation.

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 six meetings, and will hold at least one more this fall prior to generating a final report. Discussion of regulation changes, additional removal and containment, incentives, replacement with more compatible species of sportfish, 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. CPW researched harvest incentive programs and has now held two fishing tournaments at Ridgway Reservoir and one tournament at Elkhead Reservoir to educate the public and reduce the population of nonnative fish in those reservoirs. Improved public education and outreach and consistent, positive messaging about native fish health is strongly supported by the workgroup. Current actions include:

- CPW is pursuing emergency and permanent regulation changes to remove bag and possession limits for certain nonnative species at certain locations. Unlimited bag and possession for smallmouth bass on the western slope went into effect in April 2016. Information about the Recovery Program and native fish populations was included in the Colorado Fishing brochure.
- CPW is researching how best to deal with issues of waste of game so that anglers can properly dispose of unwanted nonnative fish.
- CPW is researching possible uses for unwanted nonnative fish.
- CPW is educating 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 is working 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 recommend improvements to 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 researched harvest incentive programs and drafted a white paper.

CWCB Support

- CPW will continue their pilot harvest incentive programs at Ridgway 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 from FY2015-16 will continue to be used.
- CWCB provided \$500,000 from the 2014-15 Species Conservation Trust Fund nonnative fish control funding toward purchase and installation of a net in Elkhead Reservoir to prevent fish from entering the spillway and thereby reduce nonnative fish escapement into the river during reservoir spills. The Recovery Program agreed to help fund the Elkhead net contingent upon CPW revising the management plan for Elkhead Reservoir to emphasize a compatible sport fishery. CPW developed the revised management plan and agreed to help maintain the net. Contracting, engineering and permitting has begun, and the net should be installed by spring 2017.
- 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 Ridgway and Elkhead reservoirs, and for other high priority nonnative fish control actions as determined by CPW and CWCB.
- CWCB will provide money from the Species Conservation Trust Fund when available toward purchase and installation of a net at Ridgway Reservoir to prevent escapement of illegally stocked smallmouth bass into the Gunnison River.

