TO: GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

FROM: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S OFFICE

SUBJECT: UPDATING COMPLEX RESTORATION AND MANAGEMENT PLANS

DATE: FEBRUARY 28, 2017

The Program's Land Plan specifies that the Program will use management plans to describe the appropriate restoration, maintenance and other management activities for each parcel of land acquired for the Program.[1] It further specifies that a management and restoration plan specific to each parcel will be prepared within one year of acquisition and implemented as provided in the plan. Early in the First Increment, the Governance Committee (GC) elected to split management plans for complex tracts into parcel-specific operations and maintenance plans and complex-scale habitat restoration and management plans. Non-complex tracts utilize a hybrid plan that includes habitat restoration and management as well as operations and maintenance. All plans were originally identified as 5-year plans anticipating that Program learning would result in the need for periodic updates.

Most of the 5-year plans have or will soon expire. The Executive Director's Office (EDO) has discussed this issue in the past with the Land and Technical Advisory Committees (LAC and TAC), advising that updates be postponed until 1) the least tern and piping plover structured decision making (SDM) process was completed and 2) whooping crane habitat selection analyses have been completed and peer reviewed. Those two efforts were expected to serve as the Program's best available information for guiding species-related management actions on complex and non-complex lands. The SDM process was completed in 2016 and it is anticipated that the whooping crane analysis peer review will be completed by mid-2017.

Once the whooping crane peer review is approved by the GC, the EDO can proceed with management plan updates. However, the decision to pursue a First Increment Extension has introduced new work priorities such as development of new flow management actions, updating of the Program's Adaptive Management Plan, the pallid sturgeon workshop process, and Extension budgeting and work planning. The EDO will likely not have the staff resources to complete Extension-related work and full management plan updates during 2017 and potentially 2018. Accordingly, we are requesting GC guidance regarding management plan updates.

Given the range of potential options and associated workload and policy implications, the EDO also requested input from the LAC and TAC in February. Potential options were discussed including:

1) Prioritizing plan updates over Extension-related tasks. Comprehensive plan updates could be completed by December 2017 under this scenario if the whooping crane peer review is approved by the GC in June.

2) Deferring plan updates until 2018 or 2019. Comprehensive plan updates could be completed by December 2019 under this scenario.

[1] See Land Plan Section III.

3) Developing a general restoration and management update that would apply to all Program tracts. Under this scenario, a general update document would identify on- and off-channel habitat suitability/management targets that would be used of guide management at all Program complex and non-complex parcels.

4) Deferring plan updates until the beginning of the First Increment Extension.

The LAC and TAC both recommended deferring plan updates until extension-related planning has been completed. Specifically, the committees recommended deferring until any adaptive management and/or target flow planning has been completed. This will facilitate the syncing of complex plan updates with Extension work priorities. The committees also recommended that the EDO, in the interim, develop a short memorandum outlining the general restoration and management approach and activities that will be employed in the interim. The LAC also requested that the memorandum identify specific instances where management activities diverge from what was presented in the original 5-year plans.

The EDO has developed a first draft of the requested memorandum, which follows on the next page of this document.

PRRIP TARGET SPECIES HABITAT RESTORATION AND MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR PERIOD OF 2017 - 2019

INTRODUCTION

The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program's (PRRIP or Program) general goals include:

a. improve and maintain migration habitat for whooping cranes and reproductive habitat for least tern and piping plovers and
b. Reduce the likelihood of future listing of other species found in the area.

The Program has invested 10 years in acquisition and management of habitat lands to achieve these goals. To date, the Program has acquired an interest in over 12,000 acres of habitat. These lands are identified as complex or non-complex. Complex lands are acquired in blocks and are referred to as habitat complexes. Non-complex lands are individual tracts located away from the river. During the period of 2007-2016, the Program has focused on implementation and monitored of species response to habitat restoration and management actions on Program lands. As a result, the Program has learned a great deal about 1) the characteristics of highly suitable target species habitat, and 2) our ability to create and/or maintain those habitats on Program lands.

Program habitat restoration and management actions and associated research and monitoring activities are guided by habitat complex-specific (tract-specific in the case of non-complex habitat) Restoration and Management Plans. These plans are designed to outline five years of implementation activities and in most cases the plans have, or will soon expire. Accordingly, there is a need to update the plans to reflect Program learning and associated adjustments in management and associated research and monitoring. Several of the Program's adaptive management priorities, including an assessment of whooping crane habitat selection and assessment of on- and off-channel tern and plover habitat use and productivity have been or will soon be completed.

However, there remains substantial uncertainty about the best way to utilize Program water to benefit target species. These uncertainties will be explored and addressed during a 13 year Extension of the First Increment of the Program (2020 – 2032). The Program's Adaptive Management Plan will be updated prior to the Extension in order to facilitate implementation and assessment of new flow management actions. The update will likely begin in 2017 and extend into 2019. Once the update is complete, the Program will update the Restoration and Management Plans to reflect Extension management actions and associated research and monitoring activities. In the meantime, habitat management will be based on Program learning and associated Governance Committee (GC) guidance. The general framework for target species habitat management prior to plan updates is provided below.

COMPLEX HABITAT

Least Tern and Piping Plover

In 2016, the GC completed a structured decision-making process focused on adjustment of management actions to benefit the least tern and piping plover. As a result of that process, the Program has abandoned creation and maintenance of on-channel nesting islands at Program habitat complexes. This includes termination of ongoing island creation at the Elm Creek and Shoemaker Island habitat complexes. The

GC did agree to attempt to create and maintain approximately 10 acres of moving complex approach (MCA) nesting island habitat on an annual basis. This includes removal of vegetation from existing bar/island footprints but no grading to increase island height. It is anticipated that most of the MCA habitat creation will occur on non-Program lands.

Whooping Crane

The Program completed a whooping crane habitat selection analysis in 2016, which is currently undergoing peer review. It is anticipated that peer review will be completed by June of 2017. The habitat selection analysis indicates that the relative probability of whooping crane use increases with increasing distance to nearest forest and increasing width of channel unobstructed by dense vegetation (UOCW) with probability of use maximized when unforested width exceeds 1,000 ft and UOCW exceeds 500 – 700 ft. This analysis will guide whooping crane-related management actions at Program habitat complexes. In cases where unforested widths are narrower than 1,000 ft, forest clearing will be utilized to increase unforested width to 1,000 ft. In cases where channel width is narrower than 600 ft, tree clearing and overbank disking will be utilized to encourage channel widening to at least 600 ft. Channel disking will be used to manage in-channel vegetation. In all cases, disking will be utilized to remove vegetation from the entire width of the active channel. This will result in a range of UOCWs from approximately 600 ft up to 1,200 ft.

NON-COMPLEX HABITAT

Least Tern and Piping Plover

The 2016 structured decision-making process placed an increased emphasis on the creation and maintenance of off-channel sand and water (OCSW) habitat for least tern and piping plover nesting. The Program will continue to maintain existing OCSW habitat and seek to acquire and/or create an additional 60 acres of bare sand nesting habitat. Habitat management activities will include application of herbicides, installation and maintenance of predator fencing, and trapping to reduce predation pressure at OCSW sites.

Whooping Crane

The Program currently owns two non-complex palustrine wetland sites for whooping crane roosting. The Program will continue to maintain vegetation height at these sites to ensure suitable open view widths for whooping cranes. The Program will also utilize groundwater pumping (when able) to ensure the presence of open water of suitable depth (< 12 inches) during the whooping crane migration period.

SEDIMENT AUGMENTATION

In 2017, the Program will begin full-scale sediment augmentation operations in the south channel of the Platte River downstream of the J-2 Return. Augmentation will include mechanical introduction of 60,000 – 80,000 tons of sediment annually to offset the sediment deficit due to clear water hydropower returns. Augmentation will occur upstream of the Overton bridge at the Plum Creek Complex and potentially at other locations where landowner permissions can be obtained.

OTHER SPECIES OF CONCERN

The Program management actions described above are anticipated to reduce the likelihood of future listings of other species that utilize riverine habitat. In addition, the Program will manage grasslands,

including wet meadows, to provide a range of vegetation structure within any given year. This will help support grassland nesting birds.

DIVERGENCE FROM EXISTING MANAGEMENT PLANS

Future management will diverge from existing management plans in two areas. First, the Program has ended efforts to create and maintain in-channel nesting habitat for least terns and piping plovers. The sole exception is the planned creation and maintenance of 10 acres of MCA habitat discussed above. The other difference is related to sediment augmentation. Augmentation has historically occurred at the Cottonwood Ranch Complex, located in the Overton to Elm Creek bridge segment. Future augmentation efforts will be limited to the south channel segment extending from the J-2 Return downstream to the Overton bridge.