

Pallid Sturgeon: GC Interview Summary

Introduction

Over the course of the past few weeks, we have reviewed relevant Program documents and held interviews with the full group of GC and TAC members. Based on this work we have:

- Initiated an information review by the technical committee; and,
- Proposed holding a webinar to disseminate results of technical review in advance to the September workshop.

The key messages we heard through the interviews and the implications these messages have for a September workshop are discussed below.

Some Key Messages from the Interviews

We present this section in a Question and Answer format for simplicity. We didn't necessarily ask all of these questions directly, but they concisely summarize many of the common messages we heard.

Q: What is the Program's responsibility to pallid sturgeon?

A: GC members expressed a range of interpretations of the Program's responsibility to pallid sturgeon (PS) based on three different Program documents. Some GC members referenced the Cooperative Agreement, which they understand as stating that the Program's foundational purpose is to provide habitat benefits to four target species, of which PS is one, and therefore interpret that the Program's responsibility is to provide benefits for PS. Some of these members pointed out that there may be different ways to provide benefits (i.e., ways that don't use water), but that a decision about which other methods to use requires careful GC consideration. Other GC members pointed instead to the Program Document, and interpret that document to indicate that the Program's responsibility is to test the assumption that the actions in the Central Platte can provide benefits downstream. Most of these members felt that the Stage Change Study fulfilled this obligation to some degree. Still others indicated that the Adaptive Management Plan, which specifies a do no harm approach to pallid, reflects an evolution of the Program's understanding of PS from the development of the earlier documents, when less was known about how PS use the Lower Platte.

Q: What do we need to know about how pallid sturgeon use the Lower Platte River?

A: GC members expressed a desire to better understand (to the extent possible, based on the current science) how pallid sturgeon use the Lower Platte River, and in particular to understand what role the Lower Platte plays relative to the Missouri in helping to fulfill life history needs of the species.

More specifically, individual GC members identified several topics where they felt more clarity would better inform policy-level conversations, including:

- where, when, and what habitat components PS are using in the Lower Platte,
- the relative importance of those uses,

- what scale of impact the Program could have on those uses,
- what's known about PS use of the Lower Platte relative to the Missouri, and
- a better understanding of whether habitat in the Lower Platte is limiting for the species.

Many GC members also noted a desire to better understand the hydrologic connection between the Central Platte and Lower Platte, as this is the key effect pathway for using water to supply benefits for pallid sturgeon. While the stage change study was designed to provide some insight into this question, there are outstanding questions and varied levels of understanding that should be clarified (discussed in more detail below).

In general, there was broad support for building a common understanding of the state of knowledge about PS to inform discussions on policy questions, and for identifying where key information gaps exist.

Q: What degree of influence does the Program have on the Lower Platte and on Pallid Sturgeon?

A: All GC members expressed that decisions about how the Program fulfills its obligations to PS should be made in consideration of both how PS use the Lower Platte, and the Program's ability to impact the species positively or negatively. Perspectives on the limits of the Program's influence in the Lower Platte varied in the group relative to several categories of impacts, including:

- Water projects from the Central Platte River: There are different perspectives on the key messages from the stage change study and the level of certainty in the results. Some GC members feel that the study demonstrates that the Program's water management actions in the Central Platte have no measurable impact on hydrology in the Lower Platte. Others pointed to different levels of influence on causing adverse impacts and providing benefits (both of which many GC members noted were not well defined). The Program needs to better understand the influence of Program flow management actions in the Central Platte on flow in the Lower Platte.
- Changes to PS habitat: The link between flow and pallid sturgeon habitat is widely recognized as a source of significant uncertainty. In light of that, some GC members felt that it was critical to agree on definitions of impacts and benefits among GC members. For example, some interviewees suggested that the Program could possibly consider ways to provide benefits other than through water management (i.e., buying or building habitat, knowledge benefit through research, protection against inter-basin water transfers).
- Broader impacts to pallid sturgeon: Several GC members raised concerns about using the Program's limited resources to address or make up for impacts to pallid sturgeon caused by impacts originating in the Missouri River. In particular, GC members raised concerns about the role that flow regulation and habitat loss in the Missouri plays in bringing fish into the Lower Platte, the value of protecting or providing benefits for stocked hybrid fish (and the prospect of genetic dilution), and the role of chemical contamination concerns in the Missouri. These GC members recognized that these factors are outside the Program's responsibility, but felt that they should be acknowledged openly.

Q: What is the Program's responsibility pallid sturgeon relative to the other target species?

A: Many GC members raised concerns about a perceived trade-off between the use of resources (and particularly water) for PS and for other target species. Other GC members raised questions about whether management actions to benefit species in the Central Platte have effects (negative or positive/co-benefits) on PS in the Lower Platte. Many people felt there is a need to acknowledge the Program's limited institutional resources (money and water) and that management actions for pallid sturgeon may come at a cost to actions for other species. There is a widely acknowledged hierarchy among the four target species, where whooping crane are the highest priority and pallid sturgeon are lowest, in part due to the Program's lesser ability to influence pallid outcomes. Some GC members interpret that this hierarchy indicates less responsibility for pallid sturgeon (i.e. to avoid adverse impacts) and expressed a need to remain focused on the species they know they can provide benefits for. Other GC members maintain that the Program has the same responsibility (i.e. provide benefit) for all four species, but that the hierarchy comes into play when forced to make trade-offs between species, which may drive a search for other, creative forms of benefits.

Q: What should be the technical scope of the September workshop?

A: There was general agreement that there should be an educational component of the September workshop to get everyone on the same level of understanding regarding the state of knowledge on pallid sturgeon use of the Lower Platte, and on the Program's technical capability to influence the species and its habitat. This includes identifying major uncertainties in the information with the recognition that resolving these issues (for example, by relying on outside expertise) is outside the scope of this workshop. Because of the quantity and complexity of the technical material, one suggestion was to hold a technical webinar in advance to the workshop (July), focused on some of the questions around pallid sturgeon ecology.

Q: What would be successful outcomes of this process / the September workshop?

A: There was a general sentiment shared among all the GC members that now is a good opportunity to bring some clarity to the "pallid sturgeon issue" in advance of the First Increment Extension. Several specific outcomes from the workshop were identified as contributing to that clarity:

- Bring everyone to a shared baseline of understanding about the hydrologic connection between the Central and Lower Platte, about the connection between flow and different PS habitats in the Lower Platte, about PS use of the Lower Platte, and about the key uncertainties in each of the items above. In particular, resolving the differences in interpretation about the Stage Change Study will be critical to facilitating a constructive conversation about pallid moving forward.
- Reach a common understanding of the Program's responsibility to PS, and if possible, agree on a Program policy position to inform Program actions for PS. This includes defining key terms and phrases used in the Program documentation such as "benefits", "adverse impacts", and possibly what constitutes "testing the assumption".
- Identify the range of possible actions the Program could take within the context of the First Increment Extension to a) cause adverse impacts or b) provide benefits.

Implications for the process

Based on these interviews, we note a few implications for the process of consolidating technical information about PS and the Program's responsibility and ability to influence the species positively or negatively, and for helping the Program lay out a path forward.

- To make time for a full discussion of the policy dimensions at the September workshop, we support the suggestion to hold a webinar in early July to bring everyone up to speed on some of the technical issues. The intention would be to summarize what's known and what the major outstanding questions are relative to some of the PS questions most relevant to the Program.
- Additionally, short summaries of the Stage Change Study and relevant Program policy documents (where they pertain to PS) are being developed to support a broader understanding of some of the technical and policy elements raised by GC members.
- The role of the focused Pallid Sturgeon Task Group will continue to be to develop a joint summary of key information and identify major uncertainties that are important for the GC to recognize and integrate into decisions about how to move the Program's consideration of PS forward into the Extension period. In addition, they will help to frame the various policy statements and identify the ramifications (to the Program) of various policy directions to inform GC discussions in September.