

Water Review

A Perspective On Western Water Issues Prepared By The Family Farm Alliance And Its Members

NEBRASKA

Agriculture Takes The Hit For Platte River Species Recovery

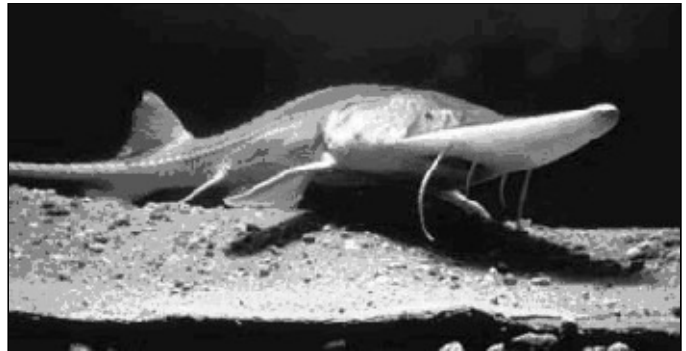
BACKGROUND AND PROPOSAL

On July 1, 1997, the Governors of Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming and the Secretary of the Interior signed the "Cooperative Agreement for Platte River Research and Other Efforts Relating to Endangered Species Habitat Along the Central Platte River, Nebraska." Since that time, the three states, federal government, water users and environmental organizations have been developing the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (Program). When implemented, the program would manage certain land and water resources following the principles of adaptive management to provide benefits for four federally threatened or endangered species in Nebraska.

While the program is intended to provide Endangered Species Act (ESA) compliance for water users in the Platte River basin upstream of the confluence of the Loup River with the Platte River, Nebraska irrigators are feeling the pinch. New demands exerted via the ESA and interstate water compacts have policy makers scrambling for water, and, as is usually the case in the West, the focus has been on increased agricultural conservation and efforts to pay farmers not to irrigate.

As proposed, the Program would be a basin-wide effort undertaken by the Department of the Interior (Interior) and the three states to provide benefits for the endangered interior least tern, whooping crane and pallid sturgeon, and the threatened piping plover. Through the Program, the states and the federal government would provide land, water, and scientific monitoring and research to evaluate Program benefits for the target species. The Program has three main elements:

- Increasing streamflows in the central Platte River during relevant time periods through retiming and water conservation / supply projects.
- Enhancing, restoring and protecting habitat lands for the target bird species.



The pallid sturgeon, one of four species targeted for recovery Under the Platte River Recovery Implementation Plan.

- Accommodating certain new water related activities.
- The Program intends to achieve these elements through an adaptive management approach employing scientific monitoring and research to evaluate the management actions and species habitat needs.

WATER

The Program's long-term objective for water is to provide sufficient water to and through the central Platte River habitat area to assist in improving and maintaining habitat for the target species using incentive based water projects. An initial objective is to retime and improve central Platte River flows.

IMPACTS TO AGRICULTURE

Nebraska irrigators are facing major changes in water usage due to the pending ESA settlement on the Platte River, as well as the Kansas vs. Nebraska settlement on the Republican River. For example, most Bureau of Reclamation Projects on the Republican River are only delivering water this year to part of their systems, if at all.

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Farmers Under The Gun, Face Water Challenge

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"One inch of water does not go very far down the canal," said Jim Lundgren of the Nebraska Water Users, Inc. "Employees are being farmed out in an effort to retain their experience for, hopefully, better years to come."

In the Platte River Basin, the State of Nebraska is proposing 500,000 acre-foot reduction in irrigation usage to bring the basin and river back to a 1997 level. This is in addition to a long-term goal of the ESA Recovery Program, which seeks another 400,000 acre-foot streamflow increase in the Platte. However, policy makers are not quite so ambitious when it comes to seeking water to meet these new demands.

According to irrigators, the State of Nebraska and federal officials are focusing their efforts on renewed conservation. And the state's water regulators are trying to come up with ways to provide millions of dollars in incentives to farmers to retire cropland from irrigation. This philosophy is raising concerns in farming communities.

"New water supplies are out of the question, the state says," Lundgren, a Family Farm Alliance Director, notes. "Don't spend any money for water, the state says. Just take it from agriculture."

Lundgren and others have observed that the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is increasingly relying on water conservation as a key component of its Western project operations. He questions whether that philosophy will lead to success in Nebraska, and points to conservation work implemented in the Republican Basin by Frenchman Cambridge Irrigation District.

"All that water conservation did was to consume more water by reducing the return flows to the river for downstream projects," he says. "Those projects are high and dry today."

Reclamation has also been pushing hard on the North Platte for more water conservation. Lundgren says the outcome has been the same as on the Republican: No water for downstream water projects, even those with senior water rights.

"We have failed to properly manage stream vegetation, which is increasing the consumption of water in those areas," said Lundgren.

Municipalities, surface and groundwater irrigators, Reclamation, states and environmentalists have also contributed to the current challenges. Municipalities have changed the points of water use and return flows and populations are rapidly expanding, which require more water. Surface water management has increasingly focused on increased agricultural conservation, which has reduced return flows. Further, says Lundgren, the state of Nebraska has failed to recognize the value of water and has not actively sought new water supplies and storage. Plus, litigation continues to hinder progress.

"The environmental organizations' continual lawsuits drive unrealistic federal regulation," he says.

Additional groundwater development, without consideration of system replacement supplies, has also reduced stream flows, especially during the current drought. Groundwater is the only option available to some users who can no longer rely on their surface water rights due to upstream water conservation efforts.

SOLUTIONS

Recent legislative efforts have focused on the Platte.

The Water Resources Development Act of 2005 authorizes a project requested by U.S. Senator Ben Nelson (NEBRASKA) that will provide for comprehensive water resources assessment and planning; environmental and wetlands restoration; attenuation of water flows; flood damage reduction; water quality improvements; and removal of man-made obstructions to the

use of the resource. Senator Wayne Allard (COLORADO) has also introduced legislation that would authorize the Platte River Species Recovery Program, including \$157 million in federal funds, and modify Pathfinder Dam and Reservoir in upstream Wyoming, to restore about 54,000 acre-feet of reservoir capacity has been lost to sediment.

"Thank goodness for the few legislative statesmen like Senators Nelson and Allard who look for solution and not blame for all our water shortage issues," said Lundgren, who is monitoring developments and doing his own share of work at the ground level.

He currently serves on the Governor's Platte River Advisory Committee, the Central Platte Natural Resources Over-Appropriated Basin Committee, and the Basin-wide Over Appropriated Basin Committee, where he and others are all searching for workable solutions. While Lundgren believes these processes are important, the outlook for developing new water supplies soon is grim.

"Our involvement with these processes is giving us access to promotion of new storage development concepts," said Lundgren. "But with the ESA issues and Interior calling most of the shots on the Platte, little hope for new storage exists."

Lundgren is also concerned with the low priority Nebraska policy makers appear to be placing on developing new water supplies.

"The state's current position appears to be to take water away from agricultural for as little cost as possible," he says. "It's unbelievable that the state won't look toward new storage or other supplies of water for their needs. It's like agriculture doesn't provide or fuel the economic engine in our state."

Sources: Nebraska Water Users Association, (308) 324-4567. Platte River Endangered Species Partnership Office, (307) 634-1756.

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PLENTY OF BLAME

No user of water is free from blame when it comes to over consumption or waste of water, says Lundgren. This includes the U.S. Forest Service., which, according to Lundgren, has elected to plant "more aesthetically pleasing" trees that require more water while promulgating a policy of reduced logging.