

NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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For release June 20, 2006

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Announces Release of a Non-Jeopardy Biological Opinion on the Proposed Platte River Recovery Implementation Program

Two Federal agencies are working together with the States of Colorado, Wyoming, and Nebraska, water users and environmental groups to ensure that four federally-listed endangered and threatened species which use the Platte River in Nebraska can be protected while allowing on-going water uses in the Platte River basin to continue.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation have completed an Endangered Species Act (ESA) consultation to address threats to the endangered whooping crane, pallid sturgeon, and interior least tern, and the threatened piping plover resulting from water use and management in the Platte River basin upstream from the Loup River confluence in Nebraska.

During consultation, the Service analyzed a proposed Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (Program) developed by the Platte River Governance Committee to provide protection for the target species, and evaluated whether the proposed actions would likely jeopardize the continued existence of the species or adversely modify designated critical habitat.

The Service prepared a biological opinion outlining the expected impacts and concluded that the proposed Program would not likely jeopardize the long-term survival of the species. The Environmental Impact Statement upon which the Service's biological opinion is based was made available to the public on May 26, 2006.

“This has been an extremely complex issue, and the biological opinion is a result of 12 years of discussions beginning in 1994 between the Federal government, the states, and represented stakeholders,” said Mitch King, the Service’s Director of the Mountain-Prairie Region. “We believe such a Program is the most efficient and equitable way to protect the species while allowing hundreds of water projects in the basin to continue in compliance with the Endangered Species Act.”

In 1997, the Governors of Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming, and the Secretary of the Interior signed a cooperative agreement to jointly pursue a basin-wide effort to improve and maintain Platte River habitats for the four target species.

The cooperative agreement established a Governance Committee with representatives from the three states, water users, environmental groups, and Federal agencies. The Committee's charge was to formulate a detailed Program to improve and maintain habitats for the target species, and to provide compliance with the ESA for certain existing and future water uses in each state.

The biological opinion prepared by the Service analyzes the Governance Committee's proposal for the first 13 years of the Program. The biological opinion focuses on potential impacts of the proposed Program on the four target species and their associated Platte River habitats.

Once the Secretary of the Interior decides to implement the proposed Program, a Secretarial record of decision will be released. For the Program to be implemented, the Secretary of the Interior and the Governors of the three states must sign a Program implementing agreement. The state legislatures and the U.S. Congress will make decisions on funding the Program.

The Governance Committee's proposed Program improves habitat conditions in the Central Platte Habitat Area (lands along the Platte River from Lexington to Chapman, Nebraska) for the three target bird species (whooping crane, interior least tern, piping plover) by:

- Reducing shortages to the Service's recommended target flows in the central Platte River for the species by roughly 130,000-150,000 acre-feet on an average annual basis, primarily by retiming of river flows to improve habitat conditions in the spring, summer, and early fall.
- Leasing or acquiring 10,000 acres of land in the Central Platte Habitat Area from willing sellers and restoring degraded habitat areas. Habitat restoration efforts will be focused primarily on wet meadows and river channel areas.

The biological opinion is available on the Service's public access website at:
http://www.fws.gov/filedownloads/ftp_region6_upload

Section 7 of the ESA requires all Federal agencies to help conserve listed species, and to consult with the Service when activities they fund, permit, or undertake may have adverse affects on threatened or endangered plants or animals.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.