

## **River Report**

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### **Angling for Answers: The Quest to Save the Colorado's Endangered Fish**

Though acquiring a reliable source of water is a priority for the western United States, another issue – unrealized by those first to dot the Colorado River and its tributaries with dams and diversion structures – has moved to the forefront of the West's water agenda: endangered species.

Four native fish have taken center stage as the species most at risk for becoming extinct within the Colorado River Basin: the razorback sucker, the bonytail chub, the humpback chub and the Colorado squawfish. To safeguard their recovery, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) has designated 1,980 miles of the Colorado River and its tributaries as critical habitat for the four fish. (This article focuses on the four endangered fish of the Colorado River. It is important to not that in the Lower Basin, the endangered southwest willow flycatcher is receiving an equal amount of attention.)

With the exception of the Colorado squawfish, the highest concentration of the endangered fish are found in the Lower Basin. Ironically, most believe the Upper Basin has the most natural habitat needed to sustain the native fish populations.

But recovering the species is not without a price. In addition to costing residents, businesses and state and federal governments millions of dollars for fish recovery programs, concerns have been raised that the endangered species recovery programs could impede water development for basin states. Initially, these concerns held especially true for the Upper Basin, which has been slower to develop its water supply than the Lower Basin.

"It's a gamble," said Tom Turney, state engineer for New Mexico.

New Mexico has developed approximately 430,000 acre-feet of water along the San Juan River and its tributaries. But Turney believes the Endangered Species Act (ESA) "Section 7" consultation (the requisite biological opinion for all new federal projects in areas where endangered species exist) being conducted as part of the San Juan River Recovery Implementation Program could jeopardize the development of New Mexico's estimated 727,000 acre-feet apportionment.

"It [the ESA] says if I can recover the fish, I can develop that 300,000 acre-feet of water," said Turney, acknowledging that the San Juan recovery program is designed to allow water and power development to proceed. Turney said in a worst-case scenario, New Mexico "may end up losing hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water," because of unfavorable Section 7 opinions.

To offset possibilities of such an occurrence, the basin states are instituting a variety of recovery programs – through studies, reoperation and direct intervention – to save these native fish populations.

This issue of River Report explores the history of the native fish in the Colorado River Basin and proposals to increase their populations.