

I. Project Title: Management of easements acquired for the Recovery Program

II. Principal Investigator:

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III. Project Summary:

The Colorado River Wildlife Management Area (CRWMA) was established in July 1998 with the first acquisition of 425 acres of floodplain habitat on the Green River in the upper Colorado River Basin. There are currently 830.2 acres contained within the CRWMA as 13 individual properties in both Utah and Colorado. The CRWMA has a boundary that includes up to 10,000 acres on the combined river reaches of the upper Colorado, Gunnison, and Green River system. New property additions are actively pursued and purchased as they become available.

The primary purpose of the CRWMA is to protect and restore backwater floodplain habitat for the endangered razorback sucker, Colorado pikeminnow, humpback chub, and bonytail. The type of habitat to be restored is flooded bottomland that is directly connected to the rivers during seasonal flooding. These shallow wetlands provide food, shelter, and resting areas for the fish.

The refuge serves to protect and restore the riparian ecosystem. Riparian areas in the upper Colorado River basin have been severely altered by reduced flows, development, and gravel mining. These shallow wetlands play a significant role in maintaining both the terrestrial and aquatic values of the system.

The areas are held as conservation easements with willing landowners, who agree to allow management and protection activities by refuge officials. Public use is not permitted as the right to access the property is retained by the landowner. The easement rights are limited only to those necessary to protect and restore habitat for the endangered fishes in order to reduce impacts on private property rights and local communities. Management activities are limited to manipulation or removal of dikes or levees to induce or improve flooding, biological studies or surveys, control of nonnative vegetation, and easement monitoring and enforcement.

The goal of the CRWMA is to monitor and manage easements acquired by the Recovery Program for the purpose of supporting and sustaining recovery of the endangered fishes. The objectives are to restore, enhance, and/or protect floodplain habitats to benefit endangered fishes while maintaining positive relationships with CRWMA landowners.

IV. Study Schedule:

Initial year: 1998

Final year: No final year

All easements are checked aerially for compliance once each year during spring runoff (May). The objective is to detect all activities which may constitute a violation of the floodplain easement contracts. Such violations would include alterations in floodplain topography or hydrology resulting from earth-moving, excavation, and/or construction or operation of flood-control features.

If violations are suspected as a result of the routine aerial flight in May, then follow-up ground inspections will be conducted as soon as possible. Otherwise, routine annual on-the-ground inspections are made in September or October. This step will eliminate more suspected violations. Once a violation is confirmed, it must be investigated and documented in detail.

V. Relationship to RIPRAP:

GREEN RIVER ACTION PLAN: MAINSTEM

II. Restore habitat

II.A. Restore and manage flooded bottomland habitat.

COLORADO RIVER ACTION PLAN: MAINSTEM

II. Restore habitat

II.A. Restore and manage flooded bottomland habitat.

COLORADO RIVER ACTION PLAN: GUNNISON RIVER

II. Restore habitat

II.A. Restore and manage flooded bottomland habitat.

Easements are located within priority geographic areas which include the Green River floodplain between Pariette Draw (RM 238) and Dinosaur National Monument (RM 318); the Gunnison River floodplain between Escalante SWA (RM 50) and the North Fork (RM 75) and the Whitewater area; and the Colorado River floodplain between Westwater (RM 127) and Rifle (RM 240).

VI. Accomplishment of FY 2002 Tasks and Deliverables, Discussion of Initial Findings and Shortcomings:

1. The Green River easements were monitored aerially in May of 2002, and photos were taken in order to document land-use practices for future reference.
2. Ground inspections of each easement have been conducted at least once within the last year, and all landowners have been met with in person or contacted by telephone.
3. We have had one pre-construction meeting to date on the Grand Junction Pipe parcel.
4. No permits were requested or issued in 2002.
5. The Refuge Operation Specialist (GS-9) position dedicated to the CRWMA became vacant this year and, due to insufficient funds to cover a PCS move, the limited number of easements in place and the instituted easement moratorium, the Project Leader decided to not refill the position and administer the CRWMA needs with Ouray NWR staff. Ouray NWR staff time, travel, and associated expenditures spent on the CRWMA are closely documented and charged to the allotted funds of the CRWMA. The salary savings from not filling the dedicated position immediately will be used to cover the cost of the incumbent's PCS move and/or salaries of Ouray Refuge staff used in managing the easements.
6. The CRWMA is now playing a more active role in the easement acquisition process. Staff conducted site assessments of 10 potential easement properties on the Colorado and Gunnison rivers early in 2002. This review process is integral to the future functioning of CRWMA as a cohesive unit, and serves to illuminate any potential future management concerns or liabilities.
7. The Bureau of Reclamation's plan to transfer 5 fee-title wildlife properties totaling 2,200 acres of floodplain habitat on the Colorado River have been placed on hold. These five parcels were established as mitigation for wildlife habitat loss resulting from the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Project. The areas are managed by Reclamation under agreements with Colorado Division of Wildlife, Mesa County Land Trust, and Colorado State Parks. Reclamation is committed to paying operation and maintenance costs for these lands for fifty years (currently requested at \$366,000/year). Those funds would be transferred to the Service with the property, along with facilities and equipment.
8. Easements have been acquired on 830.2 acres (13 properties) as of December 2002. This is a decrease in the number of acres from 2001 in that, the first three easements on the Green River (Thompson, Sullivan and Rasmussen) were dissolved and funds returned due to the discovery of an overlying easement. A moratorium on the acquisition of any additional easements was instituted by the Management Committee, with a few exceptions. The Thunder Ranch easement, on the Green River, is presently being pursued. Easements acquired by the

Recovery Program are transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for management as part of the CRWMA established in July 1998.

9. An easement management manual has been developed for acquired easements (“Administrative and Enforcement Guidelines and Procedures for Management of Perpetual Floodplain Easements, Colorado River Wildlife Management Area” dated April 3, 2000).

VII. Recommendations:

1. There are a number of properties within the acquisition zone on the Green River which have not been followed up on since the owner refused the original offer for an easement. It is known that several of these properties have since changed ownership. The CRWMA believes that there may be a potential to develop new offers, so there should be additional research on acquiring new easements on the Green River.

2. CRWMA has no funding for equipment or additional staffing to conduct habitat management activities within the easements despite an urgent need for control of noxious weeds. It is hoped that future funding can be secured for this and other habitat improvement projects which will restore ecosystem integrity to these valuable and dwindling riparian habitats. We are not required to control the weeds but we do reserve the right to do so under the terms of the easement.

3. CRWMA has no dedicated vehicle or facilities. The management area is fortunate to have access to a vehicle, office space, and office equipment provided by Ouray NWR. It is hoped that funding will be forthcoming for equipment and facilities in the future.

VIII. Project Status: On track and ongoing

There have not been any significant changes in project direction, probability of project success, or alignment with RIPRAP objectives or deadlines. However, the funding needed for effective management of the easements exceeds the current annual budget allotment. These funds do not fully cover the salary and benefits for the assigned staff, travel, training, fuel, vehicle maintenance, signs, postage, aerial monitoring, equipment, or other costs necessary to properly manage the easements.

IX. FY 2002 Budget Status:

- A. Funds Provided: \$50K
- B. Funds Expended: \$25.3K **All available funds were not spent due to the dedicated position becoming vacant. The remaining funds will be used for the incumbent’s PCS move, and much needed equipment, signs, and vehicle repair.**
- C. Difference: \$24.7K
- D. Percent of the FY 2002 work completed, and projected costs to complete: 80%
- E. Recovery Program funds spent for publication charges: N/A

X. Status of Data Submission: N/A

XI. Signed Dan Alonso, CRWMA
Principal Investigator

12/5/02
Date