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News Release



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CRITICAL HABITAT DESIGNATED FOR THE KOOTENAI RIVER WHITE STURGEON

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today published the final rule designating approximately 18.3 river miles (RM) [29.5 river kilometers (RKM)] of the Kootenai River as critical habitat for the endangered Kootenai River white sturgeon (*Acipenser transmontanus*), a rare fish found in Idaho, Montana and British Columbia, Canada.

Critical habitat is designated in the braided reach, which begins at RM 159.7 (RKM 257), below the confluence with the Moyie River, and extends downstream within the Kootenai River, into the meander reach, to RM 141.4 (RKM 228) below Shorty's Island.

This rule becomes effective August 8, 2008.

In developing this final critical habitat rule for the Kootenai sturgeon, we reviewed peer review and public comments received on the interim rule and draft economic analysis published on February 8, 2006, as well as a second round of peer review comments received specifically on the primary constituent elements (PCEs). Based on comments received and new scientific information provided to us, this final rule modifies the interim final rule.

There were essentially two modifications made to this final rule from the interim final rule of 2006:

1. To more accurately reflect the best available science, the minimum depth necessary for spawning site selection by white sturgeon in the Kootenai River has been increased from 16 feet to 23 feet.

2. This final rule corrects the river mile totals stated in the interim rule to clarify that 7.1 river miles are being added to our 2001 designation of 11.2 river miles, for a total of 18.3 river miles. The area designated as critical habitat in the interim final rule remains unchanged in this final rule.

One of 18 land-locked populations of white sturgeon known to occur in western North America, the Kootenai River white sturgeon was listed as endangered on September 6, 1994. The sturgeon occur in Idaho, Montana and British Columbia, Canada, and are restricted to approximately 167.7 river miles of the Kootenai River from Kootenai Falls, Montana, below Libby Dam, Montana, downstream through Kootenay Lake to Corra Linn Dam at the outflow from Kootenay Lake in British Columbia. Approximately 45 percent of the species' range is located within British Columbia.

The Kootenai River white sturgeon population is threatened by dam operations, flood control operations, water quality degradation and loss of habitat. Modifications of the Kootenai River white sturgeon's habitat have changed the natural hydrology of the Kootenai River, altering white sturgeon spawning, egg incubation and rearing habitats while reducing overall biological productivity. These factors have contributed to reduced numbers of surviving young sturgeon for the past 31 years. The adult population has been decreasing at a rate of 9 percent per year.

Critical habitat is a component of the federal Endangered Species Act. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management or protection. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands. A critical habitat designation does not impose restrictions on private lands unless Federal funds, permits or activities are involved. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure that such actions do not adversely modify or destroy critical habitat.

The final rule designating critical habitat for the Kootenai white sturgeon was published in today's Federal Register. A copy of the final rule can be obtained by contacting Jason Flory at 509-893-8003 or by visiting <http://www.fws.gov/easternwashington>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Susan Martin, Field Supervisor, Upper Columbia Fish and Wildlife Office, 11103 E. Montgomery Drive, Spokane, WA 99206, (telephone: 509-891-6839; facsimile: 509-891-6748).

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