



Rio Grande silvery minnow FAQs - Texas population

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to establish the rare and endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow into the Big Bend reach of the Rio Grande in Texas. The following are frequently asked questions regarding the fish and the regulatory process.

What is the Rio Grande silvery minnow?

The Rio Grande silvery minnow is a federally endangered small fish that was historically one of the most abundant and widespread native fishes in the Rio Grande Basin, occurring throughout the Rio Grande and the Pecos River all the way from Northern New Mexico to the Gulf of Mexico. Now the Rio Grande silvery minnow are gone from Texas and only occur in central New Mexico. Adults may reach 5 inches in total length.

What are the threats to the Rio Grande silvery minnow?

Throughout much of its historic range, the Rio Grande silvery minnow's decline has been attributed to changes in stream flows and river habitat due to decreased and interrupted stream flows, dams, reservoirs, and stream channelization. This species may also be affected by water quality declines and interactions with non-native fish. Diversion dams on the middle Rio Grande in New Mexico act as barriers, preventing the Rio Grande silvery minnow from moving upstream. Historically, after periods of low or no flow the Rio Grande silvery minnow may have been able to repopulate downstream habitat the following year by the drift of eggs from upstream populations. However, when the present-day middle Rio Grande in New Mexico dries and dams prevent upstream movement, the Rio Grande silvery minnow can become trapped in some areas and die in isolated pools before the river flows again. The inability of the population to find adequate riverine habitat during prolonged periods of low or no flow, and to repopulate reaches where they may have disappeared, creates a very unstable population in the middle Rio Grande in New Mexico.

Will Rio Grande silvery minnow reestablish itself naturally in Texas?

The Rio Grande silvery minnow no longer exists in Texas. Natural repopulation is not possible without human assistance. The Service believes that the best way to achieve recovery is to re-establish the fish in at least three separate areas of its native waters. The Service Rio Grande in the Big Bend reach and the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River areas of Texas could support Rio Grande silvery minnow and the Service is proposing to establish a nonessential, experimental population of Rio Grande silvery minnow in this area. The Service invites public comment on its draft proposal to bring the Rio Grande silvery minnow to Texas. Depending on comments, the Service will either terminate the proposal or finalize it into a rule that establishes an experimental population.

What is an experimental population?

Under section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act (Act), the Secretary of the Department of the Interior can reintroduce populations outside the species' current range, but within its historic range, and designate those populations "experimental." Designating a population as experimental under section 10(j) allows for more management flexibility under the Act. On the basis of the best available

information, the Service must determine whether an experimental population is “essential” or “nonessential” to the continued existence of the species.

The Service is proposing to establish a Nonessential Experimental Population of Rio Grande silvery minnow in the Big Bend reach of the Rio Grande. This experimental population would not be essential to the continued existence of the species for the following reasons: (a) an established population of Rio Grande silvery minnow exists in the middle Rio Grande, New Mexico; (b) captive propagation facilities maintain a captive population and provide adequate numbers of Rio Grande silvery minnow to maintain the wild New Mexico population at current levels; (c) the additional number of silvery minnow needed for reestablishment would not inhibit efforts to maintain the established population in the middle Rio Grande, New Mexico; and (d) the possible failure of this proposed action would not appreciably reduce the likelihood of survival of the species in the wild.

With the nonessential experimental population designation, the reintroduced population of Rio Grande silvery minnow would be treated as threatened for purposes of section 9 of the Endangered Species Act, regardless of the species’ designation elsewhere in its range. Threatened designation allows us greater regulatory flexibility in managing the species. While it is true that consultation requirements would be lessened under this alternative, the Service believes that incidental take associated with otherwise lawful activities would not pose a substantial threat to Rio Grande silvery minnow recovery, as activities that currently occur in the nonessential experimental population area would be compatible with Rio Grande silvery minnow recovery. In addition, the flexibility provided by a nonessential experimental designation allows the Service to build partnerships and explore potential habitat improvement projects with a larger group of landowners.

Critical habitat is never designated under the Act for any experimental population determined to be nonessential to the continued existence of a species.

What are the water flow requirements for the Rio Grande silvery minnow?

The Rio Grande silvery minnow does not need a large quantity of water to survive, but it does need a sufficient amount of flowing water to reduce prolonged periods of low or no flow, to minimize the formation of isolated pools, and to provide a continuous food supply and a relatively constant winter flow. Additionally, a relative increase in flows in the spring or summer is required to trigger spawning.

What habitat elements are needed for the Rio Grande silvery minnow?

The Rio Grande silvery minnow needs sufficient flowing water with low to moderate currents capable of forming and maintaining a diversity of aquatic habitats, such as, but not limited to: backwaters, shallow side channels, pools, eddies, and runs of varying depth and velocity. These habitats are usually found in areas with riverbed material made up of predominantly sand or silt. The habitat elements are necessary to provide food, shelter, and conditions that allow the Rio Grande silvery minnow to reproduce. The Rio Grande silvery minnow also needs water of sufficient quality to maintain adequate water temperatures and water quality conditions.

What area is being proposed for experimental populations?

The Rio Grande, from Mulato Dam (near the western border of Big Bend Ranch State Park) to Foster’s Weir, east of the Terrell/Val Verde county line, contains suitable habitat for reestablishing Rio Grande silvery minnow. However, the Service is proposing a larger geographic extent including the Rio Grande from Little Box Canyon downstream of Ft. Quitman, Hudspeth County, Texas, through Big Bend National Park and the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River, to Amistad Dam and the nearby railroad bridge, Amistad Reservoir; and, the Pecos River from its confluence with Independence Creek to its confluence with the Rio Grande. This additional area represents the maximum extent to which

the Service believes the fish could move and would provide a more effective recovery strategy by eliminating changing regulatory requirements in case Rio Grande silvery minnow move beyond the expected establishment area.

How might this proposal affect landowners and water users?

The Service believes that the species' habitat needs are compatible with human activities within the Big Bend reach of the Rio Grande. Because of the flexibility allowed under section 10(j), this proposal will not negatively affect landowners, water users, recreationists, nor other partners who live and work along the Rio Grande. Nothing in this proposal will result in a taking of water rights. There are likely to be positive effects of this proposal for landowners and water users. The Rio Grande silvery minnow depends on low velocity and backwater areas. These features of the ecosystem have been reduced, due, in part, to the invasion of non-native plant species in the riparian corridor, such salt cedar and giant river cane. If the Service decides to move forward after completing the planning process, this reintroduction will encourage and provide an incentive for funding efforts for voluntary restoration of the Rio Grande by controlling salt cedar and other invasive species on both public and private lands to improve the aquatic environment.

What is the process for making a decision on reintroducing the Rio Grande silvery minnow?

To date the Service has:

- (1) Compiled and analyzed all new biological information on the species;
- (2) Reviewed and updated the administrative record;
- (3) Reviewed the overall approach to the conservation and recovery of the Rio Grande silvery minnow in the United States;
- (4) Reviewed available information that pertains to the habitat requirements of this species, including material received during the public comment period from this notice and comments on the listing;
- (5) Reviewed actions identified in the Rio Grande Silvery Minnow Recovery Plan and its updated draft (currently out for review);
- (6) Determined what areas, if any, might require special management or areas that should be excluded from the experimental population area; and
- (7) During September 20-22, 2005, public scoping meetings were held in Sanderson, Alpine, and Presidio, Texas.

At this time, the Service has drafted an environmental assessment in which it presents alternatives and a proposed rule. The Service has published the proposed rule and notice of availability of the Draft Environmental Assessment in the **Federal Register** for review and comment. Comments will be accepted until **November 5**.

The next step would be to either finalize the environmental assessment and the rule designating an experimental population, identifying an experimental population area, and authorizing the release of Rio Grande silvery minnow as experimental in Texas, or adopt the no action alternative and not permit the experimental release of Rio Grande silvery minnow in Texas.

Where can I find the documents to review?

The notice was published in today's *Federal Register* and is available on the internet at <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>. To request a paper copy or a compact disc, please call 512-490-0057, or write to Adam Zerrenner, Field Supervisor, Austin Ecological Services Field Office, 10711 Burnet Road, Suite 200, Austin, Texas, 78758.